

# Re-entry Trauma: Asian Re-integration After Study in the West

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## Abstract

Many students who re-locate from host to home country are said to undergo a process of reverse culture shock akin to bereavement, involving stages of a grieving process. This has been likened to a 'W-curve' in which feelings fluctuate before reaching a more balanced state. The present study examined the re-acculturation of Taiwanese and Sri Lankan graduates after study in the West. It did not find evidence of re-entry trauma in the psychological sense already established in the literature, but it did find socio-political issues that were associated with the tension between modernism and traditionalism, or individualism and collectivism.

## Keywords

re-acculturation, re-entry, modernism, traditionalism, individualism, collectivism, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, W-curve, U-curve

## Background to the Study

In 2005–2006, 9.6% of students within the United Kingdom higher education system came from domiciles outside the European Union (Higher Education Statistical Agency, 2006 [percentage based on own calculations]). This indicates that international students are an important constituency that requires to be understood and effectively managed. Most higher education institutions (HEIs) have structures to help students from abroad to acculturate both educationally and linguistically. However, attention is less frequently given to what happens to them when they return to their own countries; this process is important because they need to be in a position to maximise their potential contribution to their home environment and to realise returns on their own or their country's investment of time/money. International students are ambassadors for their host countries and poor re-integration will make them discouraging models for compatriots who are also thinking of studying abroad.

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The present article focuses on the process whereby international graduates re-enter their home countries after study in a host country. They undergo a process of acculturation during their sojourn abroad and a process of re-acculturation when they return home: this latter may be unexpectedly fraught (Martin, 1984). Andrew Butcher (2002) in an article entitled "A Grief Observed" focuses on the problems of re-entry for East Asian students returning to their countries of origin after studying in New Zealand. He finds that their re-entry places family ties under great strain due to tensions inherent in filial piety and the changed worldview of the returnees. It also involves the loss of friends, overseas experiences, and the way of life in the host country; this gives rise to a grief that he terms *disenfranchised* because it is viewed as illegitimate and incapable of acknowledgement. Werkman (1986) too in an analysis of adjustment of Americans going home to the United States after living abroad states, "The act of leaving involves issues of separation, repudiation and loss that often have important consequences for later adaptation" (p. 7). Like Butcher, he suggests that the need to abandon the life that they have made for themselves abroad may have characteristics of a grieving process: uncertainty, alienation, anger, disappointment, feelings of being restless, out of place, and rootless.

Researchers have studied the dimensions of preparedness, of value dissonance, and of employer or family intolerance of returnee change. These problems of adaptation afflict people in many walks of life: ex-convicts, former mental patients, Peace Corps volunteers, and ex-nuns (Jansson, 1986). There is no simple relation between cultural adaptation and cultural repatriation (Sussman, 2002). Some scholars (e.g., Sussman, 2001) believe that the fact of being unprepared for re-entry home after a sojourn abroad exacerbates the difficulties of re-acculturation. Thus, Chiu (1995) postulates that low fear in advance of what can sometimes turn out to be a trauma can result in people being caught off guard and can lead to emotional distress. Advance mental preparation is, she believes, highly beneficial. Likewise, Rogers and Ward (1993) claim that *unexpected* social difficulty is related to anxiety and depression in returning home. Due to its economic importance, the professional work environment is of special interest and has been studied *inter alia* by Hammer, Hart, and Rogan (1998). They find value dissonance between host and home country to be at the heart of re-entry problems and emphasise that many bosses want nothing less than total *re-assimilation* on the part of the returning worker. They write, "[A] xenophobic response among bosses of returning managers functions to frustrate the returnee's contributions to achieving company goals" (Hammer et al., 1998, p. 81). Such an attitude deprives the company of the global/international identity that their employee may have developed abroad and results in a subtractive (negative) rather than an additive (positive) post-adaptation identity (Sussman, 2002). Freedman (1986) too points out that returnees can become targets for subtle forms of blackmail and bribery forcing them to modify their recently acquired "foreign" behaviour. Yet a hybridised intercultural identity can be a valuable resource in educational or marketing terms. People may develop inaccurate expectations of their home country if they have been away from it for too long and may be puzzled about their *actual* source of distress (Sussman, 2001). In coming to

terms with value dissonance and problems of re-acculturation, having a *clear* job or role definition reduces stress even if the job is tough: Black and Gregersen (1990) discover that people may actually be pleased with significant job demands and with having more discretion and responsibility than expected on their return. Some scholars think that there are gender differences in acculturation: Rohrlich and Martin (1991) hypothesise that young women are more willing than male counterparts to accept temporary dependence that facilitates social adjustment in the host country until they find their feet. But Sussman (2001) finds in her data that gender plays no role in predicting stress ratings on return home.

In terms of theoretical models, conceptual approaches have featured the study of stage theory or curves of adjustment. These involve a honeymoon period, followed by culture shock (Oberg, 1960), disillusion, and then recovery. These phases of the sojourner's level of socio-emotional adjustment to the host country have been characterised by Lysgaard (1955) as a U-curve: an optimistic "honeymoon" phase, followed by a disillusion and a bump along the bottom of the curve, and then a rise in morale as the process of adaptation takes place. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) have elaborated on the U-curve by applying the same concept to one's re-entry to the home country, making a W-curve. They believe that the trough encountered on re-entry to one's own country may be less profound than that encountered abroad but is nonetheless significant. Hipkins Sobie (1986) estimates the time necessary to readapt to the home society as between 6 months and 1 or 2 years. The returnee's state of mind is, however, different to that of the sojourner abroad in that she or he has acquired new experiences, attitudes, and coping styles but may not be fully aware of them.

The purpose of the present research was to find out how a sample of Asian graduates who studied in the United Kingdom dealt with changes in themselves when they returned to their home countries. What is the applicability of a Western education for such graduates returning to Asian countries? How does their Western education impact upon their employment in the East? What enduring value do they draw from their education within the host country? What is the impact of cultural value differences in gender, family, and social relations during the re-entry process? How far is the W-curve applicable to them? Do these returning students experience re-entry trauma as described in previous research?

## Methodological Approach

The sample consisted of 12 graduates from Taiwan and 15 from Sri Lanka who had done a Master's in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at a university in Northern Ireland (United Kingdom); this degree combines theory and practice, and has a clear vocational focus offering the possibility of career enhancement. The research was conducted by means of interviews of alumni who had returned to their home countries to work, for example, as teachers, lecturers, business people, or translators. These interviews were first piloted on a small sample of graduates who were working in circumstances similar to those in the target sample. They were

developed into a schedule consisting of 24 questions and administered personally by the author. She visited Taiwan and conducted the interviews in Taipei and Kaohsiung with 12 alumni (11 female and 1 male); in Sri Lanka, she carried out the work in Colombo, in Kundasale near Kandy, and in Galle in the South with 15 alumni overall (6 males and 9 females). Their ages ranged from early 30s to mid-40s. The interviews extended in length from 40 minutes to an hour and a half: no particular time restriction was set for them. Interviewees were sent the questions in advance so that they would have time to think about the issues involved. Back home, major portions of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. A data display matrix was developed featuring abbreviated forms of the questions together with themes and key quotations that illustrated particular response syndromes (Tesch, 1990). These quotes will be used to illustrate the results in the report that follows. Research of this type is clearly qualitative rather than quantitative in nature and occurred in a natural setting. As Creswell (1994) pointed out, the criteria for judging a qualitative study are different from quantitative research: "Data are descriptive," "... interpreted in regard to the particulars of a case rather than generalisations," and "... are not quantifiable in the traditional sense of the word" (p. 162). Accordingly, the main focus will be on participants' perceptions and experiences, and an attempt will be made to contextualise these societally.

## Presentation of the Results

*Reflections on experiences of host country.* The interview began with a retrospective analysis of life in Northern Ireland and linked it with recollections of return to the home country. The respondents were invited to recall their feelings on entry to the new host country and their possible homesickness for the "old" one. Then they were led to concentrate on what they felt about Northern Ireland when they went home. They analysed their reactions to its people and lifestyle, and gave practical examples of what had pleased or disturbed them.

Understandably, many people missed their families; however, 14 Sri Lankans (93%) compared with 6 Taiwanese (50%) claimed homesickness in respect of missing family and friends. This might perhaps be predicted of a more collective, traditional society. Both communities, but especially the Taiwanese, missed and wanted their own food, because the Western style is totally different from the Chinese style. In terms of culture, they missed the night market, were dismayed that most Northern Ireland shops closed at 5:30 p.m., missed their mother tongue, and also missed the warm weather. However, some of the things that the alumni missed about Northern Ireland on their return home were exactly what they had missed about their own countries on their entry to the United Kingdom: lifestyle, food, and weather (Pritchard and Skinner, 2002). Their discomfiture on re-entry formed a mirror image of their discomfiture on entry to the host country and was based on the appreciation that they had developed of the host country. Curiously, more than 40% of the Taiwanese stated that they missed their own friends and family *on entry* into the foreign culture, but an even larger proportion (50%) claimed to miss Northern Ireland people *on their return* to their own country. One alumna recalled,

The people were so friendly; they are much more open-minded than the people in Taiwan, and even if they don't know you, they still greet you. In Taiwan, we seldom do that. When I came back, I tried this, but it didn't work very well so I stopped. I really miss that [the environment in Northern Ireland], and if I have the chance again, I'd like to spend some more time there.

One Sri Lankan male had expected the Northern Ireland people to be “devoid of spirituality” and was somewhat surprised to find that “they were really good people.” A Taiwanese graduate stated,

I missed the fellowship of other students and student life. I found the Northern Ireland people very friendly, helpful, and talkative. If you made the effort to speak to them, they always responded and were keen to carry on a conversation. I also found it a good way to practise my English, though I think I ended up with a “Belfast” accent. I also missed the countryside and the space which I grew to like and enjoy.

Some interviewees missed Northern Irish food because it had been associated with pleasant experiences. They also missed the weather and the natural environment: “I miss the very cold feeling and the green, green grass” (Taiwanese female). One spoke of the air and the water “because [they] are so fresh and clean there.” When asked whether they missed urban culture, one Taiwanese respondent said that she had changed her priorities in Northern Ireland because she was there to study and “the environment was perfect for that purpose.” Words such as tranquillity, coolness, calm, and cleanliness recurred in the word pictures that the interviewees painted. There was no dust (in comparison with home) and even the bus drivers were reported to be friendly. In fact, some of the alumni who had studied at HEIs elsewhere claimed that Northern Ireland was more friendly than Scotland or England. There was a general feeling of freedom; they felt protected, and it was “much safer than I thought.” A Taiwanese male was repeatedly asked by the locals if he was not afraid to come to Northern Ireland and he said, “I felt entirely safe and never felt threatened or frightened.” There were some respects in which Sri Lankan responses were distinctive. They experienced a greater sense of freedom in Northern Ireland than at home, where especially the women are somewhat constrained. Abroad in the host society, they appreciated “respect for personal space and public–private boundaries” and valued anonymity as well as sociability: “You are not judged; they leave you freedom.” Local people were felt to be “not discriminatory.”

The interviewees were not, however, devoid of criticism of the host country. Three people had the unpleasant experience of being robbed, and some were depressed at the time it took to be able to understand the local accent. Sometimes people stared at them, particularly at the Sri Lankans, one of whom felt “like an animal in a zoo”—and this was during a visit to the South of Ireland where there is now a more ethnically mixed

society than heretofore. The sheer ignorance about their countries of origin was disconcerting. A Sri Lankan alumna wrote about this in a poem after a visit to a local beauty spot, the Giant's Causeway:

#### Visiting Giants

On the first outing that summer	“Which part of Africa is that?”
To Giant's Causeway	So I explained
Remnant of an ancient volcanic eruption	That it's the island
Ascending those perfect	Shaped like a teardrop
Octagonal stones	off the coast of India:
Contemplating precision	I didn't say
Of shape	That it has a splendid past
Full of wonder at the natural world,	But no future
I was asked by a	That its rich soil
Perfectly beautiful	Is drenched in blood
Family-of-four	And that there's hopelessness
-tourists from America	In the eyes
where I was from:	of its children.
I answered.	When they asked me
	“So what's it like!
	I only said
	“It's home.”

Source: Vanderpoorten, 2007.

Certain practical problems were retained in the mind and continued to rankle after return home. For example, some students felt unjustly penalised by university rules: they had to forfeit deposits in the halls of residence because of various small accidents, and this was perceived as unjust. Among both Taiwanese and Sri Lankans, there were complaints about the University's lack of sympathy and imagination in dealing with students from hot countries attempting to acclimatise to a relatively cold one: This was solved in some desperate cases by turning on the oven and sitting in front of it. The Taiwanese, especially, experienced the Northern Ireland transport system, the allegedly slow Internet speed, and the post office or banking services as old-fashioned “though this reflected a different sort of culture.” They were very censorious about certain aspects of youth behaviour that they witnessed (e.g., vandalism, substance abuse, and drunkenness). In fact, one Taiwanese respondent believed that

Many young people in Northern Ireland have no future due to drink and drugs . . . I went to a lot of parties and pubs and knew a lot of local friends; we went to their houses, and I realised that many young people in Northern Ireland have a terrible life. No future at all because their parents are rich and they don't need to work too hard; they drink or use drugs and I was shocked by that. Once I realised they were

rolling a cigarette and asked them why they were doing that. Two young people of 18 or 20 said, "Are you so pure that you don't know what we are doing?" I said "no," and *then* I realised. I felt very turbulent inside. After that we went to another house—young girls and boys, all of them drinking and shouting. They just don't know what to do. They don't know where their future is.

*Circumventing trouble.* The graduates were asked about difficulties in social adjustment when abroad and were encouraged to give examples of critical incidents. They reflected on racism and on freedom versus constraint. Some uncertainty circled around "conversation." Those from Confucian cultures that value silence found the Western tendency to fill all pauses irritating, and some were not sure what constituted a proper topic of conversation. Those who were knowledgeable about Northern Ireland's fraught political past avoided talking about religion and kept away from political demonstrations. This was true for both Taiwanese and Sri Lankans. A male Taiwanese interviewee stated the following:

I rarely talked about religion with Northern Ireland people as I considered that to be a very sensitive subject. I would also have avoided going into areas which people had told me to avoid or where I had heard on the news or read in the papers there might be trouble especially around those times when marching was going on or the lead-up to it [July].

A female Sri Lankan felt freer than at home in terms of what she could say but was aware of the need to project an image: "I chose my language carefully and was aware of what was or was not politically correct; Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka are both divided societies." The Sri Lankans were sometimes hesitant about how to serve food, eat, and talk during meals. In Sri Lanka, food is taken with the hands; this can be done neatly and is prevalent even in middle-class homes. Some had difficulty manipulating cutlery, and one of them reflected on the social situation:

I always had the question, am I doing it right? For example, using the fork and knife—Am I still a savage? [Laughter!]. I had such feelings every time especially in the shops. Always some feeling was pushing me—you are an outsider, you can make mistakes. It was very strange really, the feeling was there.

Little points of etiquette were noticed, and behaviour was gradually aligned with local custom, for example, holding the doors open for people. Pressure on Buddhists to drink unwanted alcohol or for vegetarians to eat red meat was usually resisted, and physical safety was a consideration when people were out at night. Asked point blank whether they had been subject to racism, interviewees reported a number of incidents, some of which related to third parties rather than to themselves. Thus, one Taiwanese who had a part-time job in a hotel noted with disapproval the manager's poor treatment of Polish employees, though his behaviour to her was unexceptionable. Both



groups actually felt the impact of religion as an axis of discrimination and noted how divisive it was in Northern Ireland. One pretended as a spoof to be a Protestant and elicited unexpectedly sharp aggression from a Catholic nationalist who took this to be true and felt hostile towards her supposed religious affiliation.

The much-vaunted Western “freedom” could turn sour when one needed guidance. Thus, one Sri Lankan respondent (female) was frustrated by lack of direction from the student counselling service:

When I had my problem with the love affair, I went to the counsellor but did not gain anything. She just listened to me. What I mean is . . . we need to get some sort of advice from him or her whereas the particular counsellor where I went did not give me any advice. I did not like that style and after that, although I made appointments, I did not go.

Obviously non-directive counselling was a disappointment to this student. Asked about where they felt freer—host or home country—eight of the Sri Lankans (53%) compared with four of the Taiwanese (33%) claimed that they felt freer in Northern Ireland; only 20% of the Sri Lankans, but 50% of the Taiwanese, claimed to feel a greater sense of freedom in their own country. Part of the reason was that the Sri Lankans did not have to bear the full burden of family life, and part also was that social constraints were lifted and they did not feel that people were watching and judging them. They did not have to conform to a strict dress code for work as they did in their own countries and there was no caste system.

*Academic approaches across cultures.* Most interviewees enjoyed the friendliness of their relationships with their lecturers in Northern Ireland and, having arrived back home again, several tried to change their own teaching behaviour using communicative methods in class, trying to come closer to those whom they taught. However, there were limits to these endeavours: first, class sizes were “too large to allow for a different kind of relationship” (Taiwanese female) and “open dialogue does not always work” (Sri Lankan female). A Sri Lankan lecturer said, “I am a different lecturer [after my experience abroad], but you *do* have status as a teacher, and most of the time in Sri Lanka you worship your teachers.” In Sri Lankan colleges, it is mandatory for students to address their lecturers as “sir” or “madame,” and although several interviewees found the Western way attractive, they thought on balance that it was best not to try to change things and that they certainly could not do it single-handed. One Sri Lankan lecturer (male) explained that the relationship with students “reflects that of father and child and the bond with students is a spiritual one,” and another discovered that becoming closer to students caused problems.

There was not much doubt about the major difference between the style of education in Northern Ireland and in Taiwan/Sri Lanka: independent, critical thinking was required in the host country, and this contrasted with the rote learning and memory work prevalent in their home systems. Many felt that rigidity and lack of resources were resulting in copying and plagiarism in Taiwan/Sri Lanka, and they were



convinced that they had personally emerged as more student-centred and innovative in their teaching. Those who had done teaching practice abroad put it at the top of their list as the most valued item. The Sri Lankans (some of whom had never even touched a computer in their lives before coming to Northern Ireland) were proud of the competence that they had acquired in managing computers and technology-enhanced learning. All valued the synthesis of theory and practice, and the insistence on library work and sound study habits that had featured in their education.

## Re-entry Trauma

*Family relationships.* Asked probing questions about what personal difficulties they had encountered on reconnecting with their families within their home culture, a clear majority claimed that re-entry had been psychologically very smooth. One Sri Lankan female noted that people had really missed her; another (male Sri Lankan) said that he “knew how to adjust back.” Most were conscious that their family and friends also had made an effort to help manage the transition: “My family realised that I was more independent and allowed me to live alone” (Taiwanese); “My family quickly felt that they had ‘got their girl back’” (Taiwanese); “I became dependent again on the comfort” (Taiwanese); “After 1 month, I was their daughter again; reality brings you back to where you originally belong” (Taiwanese). Yet there were disconfirming voices too. One Taiwanese female “missed adventure and excitement and couldn’t get along with anybody because nobody understood.”

*Attitudes towards relations between the sexes.* A section in the interview schedule dealt with relationships between the sexes on the assumption that they might be very different in home and host country, which in turn might lead to behavioural change or adjustment difficulties on re-entry. The respondents appreciated the examples that they had often seen abroad of shared gender roles and collaborative cooking or child-rearing. However, they pointed out that these were not very different from their own home circumstances. The Sri Lankans stated that professional people in urban environments also tend to share domestic duties and that the middle classes in Sri Lanka are as equal as in the West (though the urban/rural difference is large). Most of the respondents in Taiwan/Sri Lanka dismissed rigid gender stereotypes as out of date and irrelevant to their country, and emphasised that gender behaviour depends on circumstances and family background.

However, several told of inappropriate displays of sexual behaviour in Northern Ireland, which had sometimes shocked them: for example, intimate physical contact in public. A Taiwanese admitted that she was conservative even about holding hands in public, and a Sri Lankan female explained,

Our people try to be somewhat controlled. . . . This depends on our culture and how we are brought up, so automatically that control comes. . . . We had to get permission from our parents to meet each other [she and her future husband]. We had the registration first. After that we were husband and wife, but we hadn’t

had the wedding so even then we were not free until almost 1 year after the registration and the formal ceremony took place. We had to live separately even though we were married, and until we are taken formally to live in the other house, we are not supposed to have any sort of intimacy.

In such circumstances, there must have been an enormous culture gap between sexual behaviour in Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka. The most touching voice of all came from a married Sri Lankan female:

Actually again I became a bit smaller [on re-entry] because I became the wife under my husband. You know, Eastern people don't give us much freedom like in Europe, so again I have to look after the household and take a lot of responsibility; I have to do everything for my kids. When I was in Northern Ireland, he blamed me so many times [for going away] and said that the kids weren't studying.

When asked about the attitude of her female relatives (mother, aunts, etc.), this same respondent said,

Actually after I returned, they really appreciated me a lot. I got some respect because I went to the United Kingdom, not to the Middle East, because our people still think that you are our colonial masters, and they regard Europe more highly than the Middle East.

Her female relatives thus supported and admired her achievement in obtaining a Western degree qualification, but her husband still treated her as an inferior.

A minority of the young graduates had changed so much that on re-entry to the home society, former relationships were unsustainable. Several unmarried Taiwanese women claimed that boys are spoiled by their mothers, and a Taiwanese female recounted,

After coming back, I broke up with my boyfriend because I had my own thinking and he couldn't accept the girls being too independent. The boys in Taiwan, they like the girls to adjust to their thought. After coming back, I couldn't do that any more because I would say what I think and feel. I could not get back to the older way again because I had to change.

Both men and women from Sri Lanka claimed that they had adjusted their own partnership behaviour after their re-entry by increased sharing of housework as they had seen people doing in the host country—although they did not necessarily think that men and women were “the same,” and it was pointed out that each should have his or her place. A married woman from Sri Lanka used her foreign experience to improve her relationship with her husband:

Earlier as a female, I always tried to depend on somebody, my husband or my brother, but now I can go anywhere alone and do something on my own. When it comes to a problem at home, I just give him the reason. Then he can accept it. We have fewer arguments now.

In a similar vein, another said: "Being independent is less trouble for others!" These findings point to our perhaps stereotyped view of gender attitudes in other nations, especially in Asia.

*Disparity in development between host and home country.* On their return home, there were strong and sometimes negative feelings about the level of development of the home society. Some of the Sri Lankans found the lifestyle in Sri Lanka stressful and crowded, and the traffic chaotic. They wished that people would queue as in the United Kingdom; one even said that Sri Lanka lacked "seriousness of purpose." Yet another Sri Lankan regretted that the Information and Communication Technology knowledge that he had painstakingly acquired seemed to be wasted due to the poor infrastructure in his country. The Sri Lankans particularly painfully felt the contrast between a developed and a developing society, and one alumnus said about his return: "Poverty hits you in the face." He pointed out that "in a developing society, you are preoccupied with home, family, and hard work to achieve financial status, whereas in a more developed society you have more leisure, can read books, and entertain your friends." Sri Lankan respondents missed "a bureaucracy that works," "road rules," "a sense of order," and "a methodical approach." The well-known Sri Lankan reverence for teachers also had its down side: "The respect accorded to teachers is patronising; they talk down to young people; my personal life is everybody's business." One person said that the heat was "unbearable," and it was pointed out that in Sri Lanka, people are "often categorised because of caste, though this is usually hidden."

*Value of Western education within the home country.* The work circumstances and progress of the respondents were addressed. They were all asked to explain what their current job was, how their degree helped or hindered their progress, and what the attitude towards them was of colleagues (possibly less fortunate) who had stayed at home. They were led to reflect on the merits and demerits of their U.K. degree programme. The graduates were on the whole impressive, and their spoken English had improved rather than becoming rusty since they had left Northern Ireland. All were gainfully employed—even one young Taiwanese female who had recently had a baby. She lived in a rural area and had opened a private English language school for young school learners. On her business card for this venture, she had printed a pattern of hearts because the school was run "with love" (for her pupils). The overwhelming majority were involved in TESOL, either in English language instruction or in teacher training, and the minority who were not in TESOL were nevertheless engaged in cognate fields such as international trade where their English and communication skills were useful. The Sri Lankans were mostly employed in colleges of education or in universities.

It was the Sri Lankans even more than the Taiwanese who emphasised their increased work-based competence. They mentioned their teaching methods, their attitudes

towards academic theory and research, their time management and punctuality, their skill, and above all their more democratic attitudes towards relationships with students. Learning from their lecturers as role models was “a good lesson for us”; “I was amazed to see how you found time for students’ problems. Your personality changed my personality so I became close to the students. In Sri Lanka, none of those lecturers back home would have been aware of personal problems.” Again and again, the Sri Lankans expressed the great advantage to them of their programme: it gave them not just competence but also confidence—“I am a marketable person”; “Inside of me, I have something that they lack [colleagues who had stayed at home]”; “I am well recognised and respected”; “I can face any challenge”; “I can shoulder responsible tasks and complete them to get the maximum result. I can solve problems and tolerate them. I am more confident, more qualified, and more recognised.” They pointed out that by virtue of their Western qualification, they could compete successfully for additional part-time employment in the private sector where pay is higher than in government institutions. Many of the Sri Lankans felt that their colleagues at work who had not been sent abroad were jealous of those who had; this was compounded by an age factor, as it was the younger, less experienced staff who had been sent away for foreign study probably because the government wanted to invest in those who would have the longest period of service in front of them rather than in those who had shorter periods left.

All the alumni claimed that their qualification was of real professional help to them: “If there hadn’t been that kind of course, I wouldn’t be a supervisor now” (Taiwanese female). The Taiwanese had been able to capitalise on their qualification individually, and several were either doing PhDs or were looking to enrol on doctoral programmes. A PhD was the really enviable prize, and there was a feeling that “*only a PhD* makes people jealous [i.e., not a Master’s]!” However, they emphasised that it was up to *them* to make their contribution in serving their employers and regretted that their society did not always help them to do so. This view was expressed even more intensely in Sri Lanka especially as the state had financed the study of its graduates through money from the International Monetary Fund or the Asian Development Bank. The Sri Lankan alumni stressed that the government needed to do much more to exploit the expertise of the re-entrants by getting them together and analysing how they could best contribute to the national system instead of just leaving it up to the individual. They complained that the system was rigid and that many employers were reluctant to try out new ideas. The alumni in Taiwan/Sri Lanka sometimes even became weary of trying to innovate and found that just “accepting the status quo makes life easier.” Most wanted to give something back to their country, and several had already taken further courses or qualifications, for example, in educational management. So although there was no real re-entry trauma in terms of family relationships, there was a more subtle issue. The graduates feel they can bring improvement to their home societies as a result of their Western postgraduate education and are frustrated because there is no official support for change that would enable their country to reap the benefits of their education.

*Breaking out of the collectivity.* Some questions explored how much the respondents had kept together with co-national groups and how much they had developed

independently (presumably a move in the direction of individualism). The interview asked for summative assessments of their development, both personal and professional. Members of the two groups were or had become sophisticated and experienced people, but still they had overwhelmingly stuck together abroad even when this caused many interpersonal stresses and strains. One Sri Lankan female said, "The group brought its own cultural values with it and was prejudiced against anyone who was not Sri Lankan. It was bad for their English." It was pointed out that the larger the group, the more difficult it is to make international friendships outside. Several of the alumni claimed that in retrospect they would have preferred homestays rather than university halls of residence. But the Sri Lankans especially found that their independence developed greatly as a result of their experience. Strangely enough, many of them felt more relaxed in Northern Ireland than in their own countries. This was promoted by the peaceful rural environment and the fact that their primary task was to pursue their studies rather than shoulder all the multifarious responsibilities of adult life. Some respondents looked back on their stay as almost unreal and dreamlike compared with their "real lives." Almost equal proportions of people in Taiwan and Sri Lanka thought that the change wrought in them was one of personal development and growth. They mentioned their own increased openness to cultural differences, their adjustment of their a priori ideas about the West, and their increased consciousness of their own cultural heritage now that they knew another culture first hand.

Asked how they would do things differently if they were to repeat their foreign study experience, some had no regrets but others would travel more, study more, and do a better dissertation. Some were retrospectively self-critical of their own lack of English skill. One particularly brilliant alumna who had a PhD and was already an associate professor at a Taiwanese university claimed that she was shy, had low self-esteem, and even hid the fact that she had a doctorate because "people might think I am not clever enough to have a PhD." But many were determined to make study abroad a growth experience: "My cooperation with peers widened my vision. I won't stick with being just a Taiwanese for long"; by this she meant that she wanted to be a citizen of the world. They spoke of international friendship with warm appreciation. In fact, they all felt that they had developed multiple cultural identities ("You shouldn't be restricted to one community") and had acquired much broader horizons. There was also expression of sheer enjoyment: "It is the most precious memory in my life" (Taiwanese female).

In summary, it was significant that the majority of the respondents did *not* experience any particular *human* difficulty with their families on re-entry. However, they did experience some difficulty in adapting to the expectations of their employers and to the nature of their home societies.

## Discussion

Modern and traditional values are summarised by Harber and Serf (2004) in Table 1 (see next page). It is clear that Taiwan and Sri Lanka are at different stages of economic development. The United Nations Development Programme (2005) Human

**Table 1.** Contrasting Attitudinal Syndromes

Modern attitudes	Traditional attitudes
Innovative; seeks change	Conservative; prefers tradition
Individualistic	Family and group come before individual
Rational—seeks scientific explanation	Irrational—believes magical and religious explanations
Optimistic	Fatalistic—individuals the victims of chance
Has need for personal achievement	Personal ambition or mobility is secondary to habit or custom
Punctual—activities are arranged according to the clock	Activities, work, or social interaction not regulated by time
Tolerant—has liberal attitudes towards the equality of the sexes	Intolerant—roles should be carried out according to traditional values
Favours urban living and working for large organisations	Favours rural living and distrusts large organisations
Occupation is the determinant of status and life's purpose	Traditional or religious positions . . . may be more important than work for determining life's purpose
Well informed and receptive to mass media; favourable attitudes to Western education	Parochial attitudes: Makes little use of mass media and has unfavourable attitudes towards Western education

Source: Harber & Serf (2004:14)

Development Report (UNDP, 2005) puts Sri Lanka at No. 42/103 on the Human Poverty Index (HPI-1) and at No. 93/177 on the Human Development Index (HDI). China is No. 85 and Taiwan is listed as a province of China. A summary of the 2001 Index (HDR, 2001) portrays two areas of Taiwan as global hubs of “technological innovation.” China’s position as No. 45 in a Technology Achievement Index owes much to Taiwan and Hong Kong, whereas Sri Lanka comes No. 62/72, both Sri Lanka and Taiwan being characterised as “dynamic adapters” rather than leaders. These economic factors may relate to societal traditionalism and modernity, with their associated influence on the human psyche and on people’s perception of their professionalism and working environment. Taiwan is now an emerged country; it can be assumed to be *more* modern and Sri Lanka *less* modern on a developmental continuum.

The hypothesis of the W-curve (Freedman, 1986; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) that was a point of departure for the article did not apply in an emotional personal sense for the *majority* of people in the present sample who stated clearly that they did not experience re-entry trauma with family and friends, and had little difficulty in readapting emotionally to their social circles. It *did* apply to the practical and professional problems that the interviewees faced. The tendency to underestimate the influence of situation and overestimate the influence of personality may be a “fundamental attribution error” (McLaren, 1998, p. 8). One of the reasons that Butcher’s 2002 New Zealand sample experienced re-entry trauma was to do with their expectations of status and

esteem on their return. When these were unfulfilled, re-entry trauma was intensified. But the interviewees in the present study were doing well professionally, which presumably reduced stress. Clear job descriptions and a defined role in society helped them to reintegrate (Black & Gregersen, 1990). Respondents in both countries missed their family and friends. It might have been predicted that the Taiwanese would suffer more from this separation because filial piety is said to be strongest in Chinese Confucian-based populations (Rothbaum & Xu, 1995). But this was not the case. Only 50% of the Taiwanese compared with 93% of the Sri Lankans reported missing family and friends, and almost as many Taiwanese missed *food* as family! It may be that the Confucian/Chinese cultural typology has outlived its usefulness, as has been suggested by Hyland and Hyland (2006) and Abu-Lughod (1991). Indeed Feng-Bing (2004) in her thesis deconstructs the myth of the Chinese as a homogeneous category.

It was notable that the groups mainly stayed together in their own international cliques. McLaren (1998) pointed out that too strong a network of ethnic relationships can slow down adaptation to a foreign culture, and in fact quite a number of "our" interviewees regretted that they had not entered more into local life. The groups reported almost equal levels of sticking together, but it was the Sri Lankans who particularly expressed regret at having done so and indeed encountered sharp conflicts within their group. They experienced strong tension between collectivism and individualism, and perhaps this prevented them from making the most of their lives in the host society. The Taiwanese had taken more advantage of their opportunities and would have gone for even more fun and enjoyment if they had to live their lives again. This is consonant with modernist expectations in which less time is spent doing basic tasks and more is available for recreation.

The Sri Lankans claimed to a greater extent than the Taiwanese to have gained independence as a result of their experience abroad, and they emphasised their newly acquired work-based competence much more. On re-entry, they profiled themselves as career minded, ambitious, and individualistic. It is possible to see in this orientation a shift in emphasis from conservatism to autonomy and from harmony to mastery (Schwartz, 1994); in short, they no longer conformed to a collectivist ethos. Their home society obviously constrained them, especially the women, however fond they were of their own country. On re-entry, what they missed most was the freedom that they had enjoyed in the West, and in this respect the findings of the present study deviate from those of Sussman (2001) who did not think that gender played much of a role in re-acculturation. More of the Taiwanese felt that they were already independent in the first place before they went West. Though it is stated by Ronen and Shenkar (1985) that emphasis on individual achievement may be seen as antisocial in China, the present sample did not conform to the traditional Chinese pattern. The Taiwanese had become individualistic and had a new culture of independent thinking and aspiration.

In certain respects, the two cultures converged, for example, in the high value placed on equality in gender relationships, independence in study, career achievement, and value attached to the positive relationships that they had achieved with their lecturers in the host country. Their desire to *serve* back home probably derived partially



from cultural norms. As Arvind, Phatak, Bhagat, and Kashlak (2005) pointed out, "In collectivist countries, the ties between the individual and the organisation have a moral component" (p. 428). However, their own societies set limits to informal academic relationships when they returned, and the new values could not be transferred unproblematically: the graduates were constrained by social expectations and the employers' desire that they should re-assimilate (Hammer et al., 1998). Arvind et al. (2005) stated, "A U.S. manager who uses the American practice of calling a person by the first name [abroad] might be introducing some barriers to communication" (p. 374) and the Sri Lankan graduates mostly felt it impossible to reduce social distance with their students by using given names when they returned to their Colleges though they did strive for more democratic relationships. More seriously, they were frustrated in the introduction of workplace innovations and were tempted to give up trying. The Sri Lankan government especially, having spent significant sums of money on their Western education, needed to make a more organised effort to reap the benefits.

In summary, then, the problems experienced by the graduates in this sample were not those of simple emotional readjustment to their loved ones. They were more complex ones of conflicting values between modernism and traditionalism or between individualism and collectivism. Many of the interviewees no longer conformed to the stereotypes for their particular cultures; perhaps they never had in the first place as they were a distinctive and rather homogeneous sample. The fact that the graduates in this project are drawn from one course in one HEI naturally limits the generalisations that can be drawn from the study, but it also has an advantage. It controls variance arising from diversity of institutions or subject disciplines and allows attention to be more clearly focused on the country backgrounds. It is hoped that it will provide a potential baseline on which other researchers can build. Certain re-entry research (e.g., as reported in Austin, 1986) is based on American participants, and there may be a need for controlled experimentation in culturally specific analysis of re-entry problems. The time period that elapses between re-entry and research study of participants may also be worth exploring, and with a large sample it would be possible to tease out differences of gender and culture, age, married or single, rural versus urban. The effect of preparation for re-entry to the home country may mitigate tension (for activities see Blohm, 1996 or Isogai, Hayashi, & Uno, 1999). But what happens to graduates on re-entry to their home countries is certainly an important issue affecting many thousands of people, and if the present article stimulates more research in the area, it will have served its purpose. Overall its significance is that it attempts to provide a more complex and analytical approach to alleged re-entry trauma. It questions the common consensus and attempts to reconceptualise re-entry trauma more as a sociopolitical than as an individual issue. It highlights the individual nature of the students' experiences and the multivariied situations that developed when they returned. It challenges Western academics to recognise that a change process is taking place in Asia and equally it challenges the Asian nations to make a place for the new attitudes and expertise that the graduates have acquired.

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**Bio**

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