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# Transnational connections, competences and identities: experiences of Chinese international students after their return ‘home’

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International students constitute a substantial and growing mobile population globally. However, as yet, the experiences of returnees and the ways in which their overseas studies impact on their identity and professional and personal lives over time have been under-researched areas. In this article we employ concepts from theories of transnationalism as a framework for the analysis of the experiences of Chinese graduate returnees. The empirical basis for the article is a 20-month, two-stage, mixed-method study of 652 Chinese students who returned home for work on completion of their degrees in UK universities over the last 25+ years. Evidence suggests that their journeys of studying abroad and returning home are dynamic and interconnected transnational experiences. Such experiences are avenues for diverse social networks that reinforce a complex cosmopolitan identity and awareness. They are, also, avenues for transnational(ised) new competences, skills and worldviews, which are increasingly valued by the students themselves upon return home. Irrespective of differences in their demographics and backgrounds, studying and living abroad was perceived by most returnees in our research as a profound identity transforming experience. These new connections, competences and identities enabled them to view and live life with a new sense of self at ‘home’ and, as a result, function in ways that continued to distinguish themselves from those around them over time. The findings have implications for higher education institutions and agencies that are concerned with enhancing the quality of university internationalisation. They also have implications for a broadened empirical and conceptual understanding of transnationalism.

## Introduction

This paper draws upon empirical evidence from a British Academy funded mixed methods research project on the impact of international study experiences on the lives and careers of Chinese returnees. Studying abroad and returning home are perceived by many Chinese graduate returnees as dynamic and interconnected transnational experiences. Such experiences are typically characterised by their constant negotiation, reproduction and expansion of their social, cultural and professional identities in an attempt to enact meanings ‘in the course of their everyday lives within and across each of their places of attachment or localities of perceived belonging’ (Vertovec, 2009, p. 77). The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to locate the analysis of

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returnees' experiences in the wider theoretical debates of transnationalism and through this, make sense of the lives of this vast group of individuals who play an integral role in shaping the identity of the present and future workforce in their country of origin.

The research was set in the context of internationalisation. We have argued with evidence in an earlier publication that internationalisation has not been a value free phenomenon since its first emergence (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2011). The historical and current migration of skills and academic talent and the flows of economic, social and cultural capital continue to show that inequalities have remained intact. Irrespective of the persistent increase in international student mobility, studying abroad activities remain reserved for a select few [International Association of Universities (IAU), 2010]. In the case of China, although Chinese students are the largest single international student group in the UK, less than 2% of tertiary students from China study abroad [United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2009]. They represent two groups of elites in the society: the socio-economic elite (e.g. mostly self-funded students) and the educated elite (e.g. students funded by scholarships) (Wang & Miao, 2013). However, the purpose of the research was not to examine the inequalities in flows of knowledge, pedagogical practice and discrimination as reported by some scholars (e.g. Madge *et al.*, 2015). Nor was it conceived as a critical analysis of the social origins and family habitus of mobile students. Rather, the research was set out to examine whether and how changes and transformation identified in Chinese returnees' competences and identities as a result of their overseas educational, social and cultural experiences influenced their capacity to function effectively in their professional and personal lives over time. The research considered the difference in returnees' demographics and backgrounds as indicated by their time of study in the UK (e.g. in the early 1980s vs in the first decade of the twenty-first century) and sources of funding. However, it found that irrespective of the differences in backgrounds, the majority of returnees were able to explore different academic, social and cultural avenues while studying in the UK and through these, develop transnational(ised) connections, competences and identities that continued to contribute to their capacity and functioning in employment and society at 'home'.

### **The context**

Attracting international students continues to be one of the highest priority activities within institutional internationalisation policies (IAU, 2010). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) report on the global profile of diasporas (OECD, 2012), there are nearly 2.5 million international students in the OECD area alone in 2009. Among these, the number of Chinese students is by far the largest, comprising almost 40% of the international student population.

Empirical research by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds has, collectively, provided useful accounts of the challenges and successes that international students have experienced. Researchers in psychology have primarily focussed upon stress levels and coping strategies and the quality of the support mechanisms that are

available to promote (or inhibit) students' intercultural adaptation, intra- and interpersonal interactions and psychological wellbeing (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Cushner & Karim, 2004; Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Suspitsyna, 2013; Glass & Westmont, 2014). However, the limitation of their 'objectivistic' methodology (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 25) means that they often fail to consider the role of human agency in the management by international students of their overseas learning experiences or to elaborate on the complexity of international students' identity negotiations and sense making in the cultural, social and educational worlds that they are exposed to. The educational literature tends to be based upon small scale, qualitative studies (e.g. Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Sherry *et al.*, 2010; Guo & Chase, 2011), focusing upon identifying patterns of intercultural struggles and the essential qualities required by international students to achieve personal changes and expansion (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Gu & Maley, 2008; Gu, 2009). The bulk of this body of research tends to be driven by practice-oriented concerns and thus has attracted growing criticism for its lack of theorisation (Gudykunst, 2005). In contrast, geographers' research on mobile students tends to be grounded in theories of migration, sociology and/or socio-economics. This body of migration research tends to be qualitative, and in many cases, small scale in nature. However, it has provided important evidence on the ways in which biographical, sociocultural and socio-economic factors influence the geographical (im)mobility of students (e.g. Findlay & King, 2010; Carlson, 2013; Geddie, 2013; Waters & Leung, 2013a) and how mobile students' access to transnational education – whether it was through family migration or studying on off-shore programmes in their home country (e.g. Sin, 2013; Waters & Leung, 2013b) – can be converted to social and cultural capital that fosters their social and economic advantage, class reproduction and employment and social mobility (e.g. Brooks *et al.*, 2012).

However, as yet, there remains a dearth of empirical evidence and conceptual exploration on the ways in which study-abroad experiences may influence and continue to shape returnees' identities, values and behaviour in their home-country contexts. Statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education show that China has witnessed an upsurge in the number of overseas-educated Chinese returning to their homeland for work – from 20,000 in 2003 to a notable 42,000 in 2006 (Xinhuanet Reporter, 2007). Recent evidence from OECD further confirms that the rapid economic and political development in China has significantly improved the number and qualities of opportunities available for those educated graduates who return (OECD, 2012). In addition, the Chinese government's sustained policy endeavour to attract the return of the country's expatriate talent is also reported as a key pull factor (Wang & Miao, 2013). From our research on Chinese returnees, we have learned that such transnational attitudes, skills and contacts were perceived by many Chinese returnees to be particularly valuable when constructing and reconstituting their lives and careers 'at home'. This was, at least in part, because activities in almost all spheres of life and work in the homeland of China also involve increased transnational connections and ties. It was on this empirical basis that we use transnationalism as a conceptual lens to make sense of the experiences of Chinese returnees in our research.

### The conceptual lens: transnationalism

By way of definition, Vertovec (1999) describes transnationalism as:

... a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common – however virtual – arena of activity (Vertovec, 1999, p. 447).

It is concerned with ‘linkages between people, places and institutions crossing nation-state borders’ (Vertovec, 2009, p. 1), which lead to ‘sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formation’ (Vertovec, 2009, p. 2). As a topic of study transnationalism has experienced an exponential growth in interest over the past 20 years. This has generated an increasingly sophisticated theorisation of the phenomenon and a set of key concepts that flow from the study of the movements, networks and experiences of transnational actors has emerged. We focus here on a selective set of concepts (below) that resonate with the lived worlds of individual international students during and after their studies.

Many transnational individuals experience what has been called diaspora consciousness, marked by ‘dual or multiple identities’ (Vertovec, 2009, p. 5). Individuals’ attachments are ‘de-centred’, marked by more than one national and cultural identity, and a sense of being at home in more than one place (or, potentially, no particular place). Students might feel, for example, that they have a Chinese self and an international student self (see, for example, Gu *et al.*, 2010). The awareness of these in the transmigrant individual facilitates a range of bonds with others who have similar experiences, or whose identity or identities overlap in any number of ways with their own. For students, this might mean links to home, or links to other students from the same country, or, equally, links after graduation to their foreign *Alma mater* and its alumni beyond the end of their studies and their return to their home country. This particular subjectivity or ‘transnational imaginary’ (Wilson & Dissanayake, 1996) is a reflection of the embeddedness of individuals across a range of networks, and can (but does not necessarily) create transnational communities out of transnational groups (Al-Ali *et al.*, 2001; also Bauböck & Faist, 2010).

The decentred nature of the transnational identity does not mean that situated space no longer matters. Rather, for transnationalists this embraces both ‘here’ and ‘there’. Of particular relevance is the nature of the locality in which they live during their period abroad. Our previous research has demonstrated the importance of receiving universities typically as a particular type of community, which is intentionally, self-consciously and *de facto* international in its outlook and composition (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009; Gu *et al.*, 2010): a kind of transnational ‘bubble’ within a wider local and national context. In addition, in many Western countries, including those that receive the most international students, ‘25 years of identity politics (around anti-racism and multiculturalism, indigenous peoples, regional languages, feminism, gay rights, and disability rights) have created a context in which migrants feel much more at ease when displaying their transnational connections’ (Vertovec, 2009, p. 16). Freedom to express a range of identities and relationships with others,

who share aspects of those, are new experiences for some, including students experiencing study abroad. Thus:

The fit between specific kinds of migrants and specific local and national contexts abroad shapes not only the likelihood of generating, maintaining or forsaking transnational ties, but also the very nature of the ties that migrants can forge with their place of origin. (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998, p. 13)

These various subjectivities, networks and environments, aided by ubiquitous modern technologies that facilitate instant communications across space, lead for many to a kind of everyday transnationalism. Family life, gender relations and the multiple dimensions of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), are all conditioned by transnational activities and life-worlds. The apparent ease of transnational practices and multifocal integration demands that individuals possess levels of cosmopolitan competence for coping effectively with cultural difference. Such individuals actively familiarise themselves with the nature and practices of other cultures and understand how to move easily between them (Werbner, 1999). The not atypical international student is linked on Facebook to his or her local friends from 'home', their university programme colleagues, people they have never met from their own country studying similar programmes at other universities, and a global network of music fans who share their tastes. They are able to communicate comfortably but in a slightly different way with all of them, which epitomises this set of cosmopolitan competences. Reaching this stage (i.e. becoming affiliated to multiple networks) from monocultural roots is not simply a question of skill acquisition or skill gains, however: it is a process fundamentally of identity transformation. This identity transformation is multidimensional, and as with other intercultural identities, it has personal, enactment, relational and communal layers (Hecht, 1993). Our study shows that each of these represents a particular manifestation for migrant students as transnational actors, both while they are abroad and when they return to their home countries.

## **The study**

### *Focus*

The research upon which the paper is based sought to investigate how, why and to what extent overseas educational experiences may (or may not) contribute to the personal, professional and career development of Chinese students who return to work in China. Key research questions included:

1. What do Chinese returnees believe they have gained from their experiences of studying in the UK?
2. How have these gains impacted on their lives and careers over time? What do they believe have been the most profound changes personally and professionally?

### *The sampling process*

The fieldwork was conducted in collaboration with the British Council (China), which holds a systematic database of more than 8000 Chinese alumni who had



experienced higher education and training in the UK since the late 1970s, including those supported by government scholarship schemes (i.e. the educated elite) and others who were self-financing (i.e. the socioeconomic elite). Given the major influx of Chinese students to British universities since the launch of the British Government's long-term worldwide educational campaign in 1999, it is perhaps not surprising that the makeup of the alumni is skewed towards self-financed returnees who completed their studies post 2000. In order to enable a systematic analysis, especially taking into account the possibility of low response rate, the research team decided to recruit all the alumni registered on the database in the initial stage.

### *Research organisation and data analysis*

This 20-month two-stage research project combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The first stage was an online questionnaire survey that explored the Chinese returnees' perceived professional and personal change resulting from their UK educational experiences. The survey gathered basic demographic data on respondents including the length of and reasons for their overseas studies, previous experience of studying/working/living overseas, and the perceived value and achievements resulting from the experience. The main part of the questionnaire focused on the extent of their agreement, with answers based on a Likert-type scale, to a series of statements about their career and personal life, their experience immediately upon their last return to China for work, and any perceived changes in themselves as a result of their study abroad experience that continue to impact on their work or personal life. The questionnaire survey was also used to identify possible participants for the second stage of the research.

The questionnaire was piloted and then distributed by the British Council and a total of 652 completed questionnaires were returned. Although the response rate of 8% was low and we cannot claim the representativeness of the profiles of the sample, the size of the response still enabled us to conduct robust analyses and through these, identify common patterns of the transnational experiences of this distinctive group of travellers and settlers in the current context of internationalisation. The respondents covered a wide age range (between 20 and 66 years old) who had returned to China at different time points (from less than 6 months to 27 years ago). As Table 1 shows, those sponsored by their parents constituted the largest group of the survey sample ( $n = 427$ , 67%), followed by 17% ( $n = 110$ ) funded by their own personal savings and 14% ( $n = 90$ ) supported by scholarships and bursaries. The remaining 14 were funded by friends or other means (missing data  $n = 11$ ). In addition, 81% had a Master's degree from the UK and 69% stayed overseas for up to 2 years. The remaining minority (31%) stayed in the UK for up to 8 years and the majority of these completed PhDs after their Masters studies in the UK. A distinctive characteristic of the respondents is that half were in their twenties and 76% had returned to China within the last 5 years. This, to a large extent, reflects the upsurge of Chinese students studying abroad and returning home in the last 5–10 years.

Parametric and non-parametric tests of variance were conducted to examine the differences between various groups, taking into account generic factors relating to their gender, age, year of return and length of stay in the UK. Factor analysis, where

Table 1.

Largest contributors to fees and living costs in UK * Q5 Age Groups Crosstabulation			Q5 Age Groups					Total
			20 to 24 years	25 to 29 years	30 to 34 years	35 to 39 years	40 to 66 years	
Largest contributors to fees and living costs in UK	Personal income/savings	Count	0	12	39	49	10	110
		Proportion within largest contributors to fees and living costs in UK (%)	0.0%	10.9%	35.5%	44.5%	9.1%	100.0%
	Scholarship/Sponsorship/Bursary	Count	2	5	19	25	39	90
		Proportion within largest contributors to fees and living costs in UK (%)	2.2%	5.6%	21.1%	27.8%	43.3%	100.0%
	Parents/ Relatives	Count	38	266	103	19	1	427
		Proportion within largest contributors to fees and living costs in UK (%)	8.9%	62.3%	24.1%	4.4%	0.2%	100.0%
	Other	Count	1	1	5	4	3	14
		Proportion within largest contributors to fees and living costs in UK (%)	7.1%	7.1%	35.7%	28.6%	21.4%	100.0%
	<b>Total</b>	Count	<b>41</b>	<b>284</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>641</b>
		Proportion within largest contributors to fees and living costs in UK (%)	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>44.3%</b>	<b>25.9%</b>	<b>15.1%</b>	<b>8.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



appropriate, was used to explore the inter-correlations between a range of variables relating to different aspects of re-entry experience and professional gains of transnational practices, especially those relating to returnees' skills, values and competences.

Results of the survey informed the design of the second stage of the research where 14 returnees were chosen for face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate in greater depth the nature of returnees' transnational experiences and the ways in which such experiences continue (or do not continue) to influence them as individuals at work and in their personal lives. The selection of interviewees took into account their gender, age, length of stay in the UK, year of return to China, overseas qualifications and their responses to the survey. It also considered the sources of funding for their studies (e.g. self-funded or on government scholarships) and their professional backgrounds including whether they had work experience prior to their overseas studies and the type of organisations that they were working for at time of the interview (see Table 2).

The qualitative research reported here focuses on how returnees interpreted their lived experiences and constructed the meanings of these within the social, cultural and national contexts in which they studied, lived and worked. It is thus positioned in the phenomenological research tradition in which the researchers aim to identify the essence of the experiences as related by the research participants (Creswell, 2003) and reveal in detail the ways in which the participants interpret their experiences, construct their worlds and create their meaning (Merriam & Associates, 2002). All interviews were transcribed and then translated by professional translators from Chinese to English to be analysed by the research team.

The interviews were coded, categorised and transferred into an analytical matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to provide a framework for identifying the key influences, tensions, professional and personal concerns of Chinese returnees in different phases of their careers and in different work and life contexts for interpretation. Detailed narrative portraits of returnees' study, personal and professional experiences were then constructed. These portraits included account of, for example, their personal and professional backgrounds, study and work experiences in different contexts, perceived transitional identities and competence development over time, and social networks that had facilitated their adaptation, development and transnational practices in the UK and in China. Experiences and personal markers of transnationalism were late additions to the analyses as the salience of this framework emerged during the analysis: key concepts from transnationalism consolidated several of the emergent themes.

The potential for harm in this research was relatively low because the nature of the research was to understand a phenomenon rather than implement interventions. Nonetheless, other ethical issues with regard to consent, privacy and confidentiality of data were respected in each phase of the research. It is also worth noting that the research team comprised of academics who were at times international students in the UK and who had researched and published in different but relevant fields of education and comparative education, from sociological and psychological perspectives. We believed that it was ethically and intellectually essential to fully engage a transnational team of researchers with diverse but complementary experience and expertise

Table 2. Summary characteristics of interview participants

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Length of stay in China (years)	Length of stay in UK (years)	Funding for study	Highest qualification	Reasons for returning to China	Work experience prior to study	Current status of work	Type of organisation
Liang	Male	25	1	2	Relatives	MSc	More career opportunities in China	No	Working	State-owned enterprise
Zhou	Female	26	1	1	Relatives	MSc	Prefer the lifestyle in China	No	Working	State-owned enterprise
Dan	Female	27	0	5	Relatives	MBA	Few job opportunities in foreign countries	Yes	Working	Solely foreign-owned enterprise/joint ventures/foreign funded organisation
Wen	Female	27	1	2	Relatives	MA	More career opportunities in China	Yes	Working	Private-owned enterprise
Bo	Male	27	1	6	Relatives	BSc	More career opportunities in China	No	Working	Solely foreign-owned enterprise/joint ventures/foreign funded organisation
Qian	Male	30	1	2	Relatives	MBA	Wish to contribute to home country	Yes	Looking for a job	No selection

Table 2. (Continued)

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Length of stay in China (years)	Length of stay in UK (years)	Funding for study	Highest qualification	Reasons for returning to China	Work experience prior to study	Current status of work	Type of organisation
Zhao	Male	30	6	1.5	Relatives	MSc	Few job opportunities in foreign countries	No	Working	Private-owned enterprise
Zeng	Male	30	0	8	Scholarships	PhD/EdD	More career opportunities in China	No	Working	Government or institutional organisation (e.g. universities)
Zhang	Female	32	2	3.5	Personal income	MSc	Prefer the lifestyle in China	Yes	Working	Solely foreign- owned enterprise/joint ventures/ foreign funded organisation
Ning	Male	34	5	1.5	Personal income	MSc	More career opportunities in China	Yes	Working	Solely foreign- owned enterprise/joint ventures/ foreign funded organisation
Ze	Male	35	1	1.5	Personal income	MBA	More career opportunities in China	Yes	Working	Private-owned enterprise
Shi	Male	45	4	1.5	Personal income	MBA	Never thought of staying overseas	Yes	Working	Private-owned enterprise

Table 2. (Continued)

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Length of stay in China (years)	Length of stay in UK (years)	Funding for study	Highest qualification	Reasons for returning to China	Work experience prior to study	Current status of work	Type of organisation
Chu	Male	56	26	2	Scholarships	MA	More career opportunities in China	Yes	Working	Government or institutional organisation (e.g. universities)
Heng	Male	58	15	6	Scholarships	PhD/EdD	Few job opportunities in foreign countries	Yes	Working	Government or institutional organisation (e.g. universities)

in researching the transnational practice of Chinese returnees in order to achieve a more nuanced understanding.

The analysis below explores the development of transnational identities among the respondents through a framework composed of the following four key concepts. The first two – diaspora consciousness and embeddedness – are related to their experiences of being exposed to and establishing connections with multiple cultural, societal and social environments and networks. The second two focus upon the consequences of such experiences in relation to two most profound changes perceived by our Chinese returnees: enhanced cosmopolitan competence and identity transformation. Each of these will be discussed in turn, with reference to both the qualitative and quantitative data from the project.

## Findings

### *Diaspora consciousness: awareness of 'here' and 'there'*

The Chinese returnees demonstrated clear indications of diaspora consciousness, which had different manifestations during and after their studies. Their answers to the questionnaire and interview questions revealed some intriguing practical and emotional responses to the challenges of fitting in while studying in the UK, and again upon their return to China. These illuminated the development of self-consciousness as a Chinese citizen both 'here' and 'there' (i.e. diaspora consciousness). A strong sense of being Chinese on the one hand and an emergent self-consciously international outlook, on the other, marked their responses.

The survey results show that the majority of the returnees ( $n = 473$ , 75%) felt that as a result of their study abroad experiences, they were more knowledgeable about their own Chinese backgrounds and home culture than those who never stayed abroad for a lengthy period of time. This is especially the case for those who were mature (92% in the 40+ age group vs 72% aged 20–24 and 68% aged 25–29), those who worked before studying abroad (80% vs 69% who did not), and those whose studies were funded by scholarships (85% vs 79% self-financing and 71% supported by parents/relatives).

The interviews provided a detailed narrative account about returnees' enhanced awareness of their own culture 'here' (China) and that of others 'there' (elsewhere, especially the UK, often generalised as 'the West'). For almost all interview participants (12 out of the 14 interviewees), the process of managing the emotional, psychological and intellectual challenges that they had experienced while studying and living in a foreign country was the same process in which they learned to step outside their own cultural and habitual norms and values in order to better understand 'the other'. For example, Zeng, 30 years old, who returned to Beijing upon successful completion of his fully funded Masters and PhD in computer science reported that,

I used to have a very stubborn attitude. But gradually, I felt that I'd become more flexible and open-minded. . . . I gradually realised that every country has its own unique mechanism, strengths and weaknesses, which could not simply be labelled as good or bad. I've learned to accept the diversity of the world which is created by different people with different behaviours and values.

Zhou, 26 years old, supported by her parents to study a Masters degree in accounting and financial management, was working in a state-owned enterprise at the time of the study. She too was delighted about the intercultural encounters that she had experienced in the UK and also, the heightened transnational perspective that she acquired to view, understand and communicate with cultures other than her own: 'Staying in a foreign country, you'll find the world is really big, and you can get into different circles to explore the unknown.'

An unexpected but powerful outcome of such analytical, empathetic and reflexive evaluation of their past in China and everyday experiences in the UK was a transnational perspective that enabled them to be more appreciative of their own cultural traditions and values. As Heusinkvelt (1997) pointed out, 'indeed the greatest shock may not be in the encounter with a different culture but in the recognition of how our own culture has shaped us and what we do' (1997, p. 489). Upon return home, a 'double consciousness' (Golbert, 2001, p. 717) of the home culture and that of the hosting country garnered from attempts to connect meaningfully across national and cultural borders was perceived by the majority of the interviewed participants as having contributed to their heightened transnational conception of culture, values and self. The experiences of Ze illustrate this.

Ze, 35 years old, had a successful career in China but felt it was time that he took a break to upgrade his professional profile and experience the challenge of a different way of thinking, working and living. Exposure to a different way of working and thinking invited him to re-evaluate his own values, the ways he used to deal with people in China and his past. As a result, he learned more about himself and his cultural roots. Back in Beijing for more than a year, some profound changes in his values continued to influence him.

The understanding of different cultures is of the greatest help to me, which can never be learned in universities at home. . . . Without the study-abroad experience, maybe I would never get such a clear awareness. It made me look at things from different perspectives and thus enabled me to reflect on problems at a much deeper level. . . . Naturally, we all hope that China will develop quickly, but we also know that we still have a lot to do to improve the country. This awareness comes from the comparison with other foreign countries . . . .

Like almost all the other interviewees in our study, Ze's emotional response was embedded in a clear awareness of multi-locality and a desire to connect (or reconnect) with his 'roots', in either physical or virtual terms.

For many, their confidence in China's place in the world, and the 'brighter future' that China's rapid development was offering were found to have played a crucial role in their decision to come home. For more than half of the returnees involved in our survey research, career opportunities of which they were clearly aware in China were a significant 'pull' factor. There were also personal and social factors, such as family, a sense of belonging and societal recognition, which had drawn many Chinese back 'home' – despite work opportunities elsewhere. For example,

Although both Japan and Britain offered attractive work opportunities, I belong to China. The recognition from my family and friends are important to me. (Qian, male, 30)

However, although coming 'home' was a happy experience for the majority of survey respondents (83%), in the interviews more than half also reported sadness at leaving the UK, having conquered the challenges they had faced, and developed networks of support and friendship: '[my feelings when I got on board the plane for China were] a little reluctant. I was bidding farewell to a place I'd got used to, a place with many good friends and an environment I could not be intimate with when I came back' (Liang, male, 25-year-old).

Added to this emotional experience was an awareness that there were differences between themselves and those who never stayed abroad for a period of time. A total of 88% of the survey respondents reported that they felt different from others around them in China (regardless of the differences in the respondents' ages or the time period in which they returned to China). However, those who stayed in the UK for the longest period of time (5–8 years) (48%) tended to feel most strongly about this, compared with those who stayed for 2–5 years (41%) and up to two years (29%) ( $p < 0.05$ ). As for the interviewed returnees, although all expressed a similar view, half ( $n = 7$ ) made the point particularly strongly. Among them, 32-year-old Zhang who stayed in the UK for almost 4 years commented,

Those who have once studied abroad usually gain a clearer understanding [of foreign countries] through their own sufferings and can accept many things that seem incredible to the people at home.

Such awareness of being different from others then stimulated a desire to bond with people who shared their consciousness and had similar experiences. Upon their return to China 85% of the survey respondents reported feeling more comfortable with people who had shared a study abroad experience, whether or not they had been part of their circle while in the UK. In a sense, they felt part of a new, renationalised diaspora of people who had shared transnational educational experiences. For many, the feeling of diaspora consciousness was a seed for a profound change.

### *Embeddedness*

The experience of diaspora consciousness encouraged returnees' active identification with a range of social networks in which they became embedded during and after their studies: networks that spanned connections to home, affiliations with groups in the UK, and an increasing integration into supranational networks including religious groups and subject-specific academic communities.

Relationships with other Chinese residents during their period of study and embeddedness in this network of support were sources of comfort to many. This is because, at least in part, when being exposed to an alien environment, mutual support and understanding from co-nationals provide a 'social setting for the rehearsal and affirmation of cultural identity' (Bochner, 1977, p. 290). As 25-year-old Liang noted:

... with the mutual help of the warm-hearted local Chinese, who collected and offered a lot of useful information, I was soon fitting in. ... The newcomers, classmates and those who met on the plane were communicating with each other, helping each other, and exploring a new life together.



Supported by his parents and relatives, Liang spent two years in England. Although the primary purpose of his visit was to complete an MSc in a top-ranked UK university, he was more excited about the opportunity to 'enrich my experience and broaden my horizon'. Access to a good support network of Chinese friends enabled him to settle into an unfamiliar environment without too much struggle.

Shortly after his return to China, like the majority of his peers in this study, Liang also noticed the difference between his friends and himself. However, he managed to not only retain his old friendship circles but also take advantage of his study-abroad experience to extend and broaden his social networks and ties:

In the first three months on my return, I could clearly feel the difference between my friends and me. It might be because we had not been in frequent contact for more than a year. So at that time, I remained in a circle of friends who had been abroad. But I am pleased that I am back in touch with my old friends now, although we tend to have different topics from those who share study-abroad experiences.

Internal diaspora consciousness was thus manifested in embeddedness across different networks serving different functions.

The two interviewees whose studies were in the more distant past generally found the experience of studying in the UK more isolating. This is not surprising, given how technologies developed in the past two decades have aided the process of embedding into a range of networks. The restrictions they faced as Chinese students abroad are also of marked contrast to the freedoms experienced by contemporary Chinese international students. As 56-year-old Chu who was among the first few after the Cultural Revolution to be sponsored by government scholarships to study a master's degree in the UK, noted:

I chose a Chinese roommate for I was not bold enough to live with a foreigner and also because of the nature of my work (which was then politically sensitive). (Chu)

The hardships endured by this interviewee during his study may not have facilitated a transnational identity, but they fostered resilience:

My student life in the UK was pretty hard. I lived in a small attic in Durham. . . . But I didn't care too much about the living conditions. I worked like a peasant in the rural areas during the Cultural Revolution, so I can survive and manage extreme living conditions. I just wanted to learn and wanted to work hard. . . . I was challenged by a completely different approach to teaching and learning, but I enjoyed it! It made me think and I became more open-minded.

Returnees sought out a range of networks upon their return, including, notably, others who had studied in the same university: 'Even now I like to talk about the life there when having dinners with my previous schoolmates from Lancaster although we studied different majors and were enrolled in different years' (Zhou, female, 26 years old). Like the vast majority of the returnees in our study (>82%), Zhou rated her ability to both be independent and to work collaboratively with others as 'the most important gain':

What I am especially proud of myself is that I have become an independent person. . . . First, I've learned to think and do things independently. But this independence must be understood in a community context, because although one needs to rely on himself, he also needs to know how to cooperate with his team members. So instead of working hard all by myself, I communicate with others and pool the wisdom of the critical mass to finish tasks. This is the most important gain to me.

Upon graduation, she chose to work in Beijing 'because most of my best friends are here'. For her, networks of friends 'play a very important role in my life'. She also received help resettling from alumni from her university who were already settled in Beijing, reflecting a new version of diaspora consciousness as well as embeddedness in a particular network.

There is an alumni association of Warwick in Beijing. We organize some gatherings to keep in touch and help each other. . . . Attending these activities enriches my life and broadens my circle of friends and social contacts. . . . It's really warm and pleasant to meet so many friends who share the same experience and who are interested in similar topics. Although we didn't know each other, we felt it easy to bond into a group, as if there was a thread pulling us together.

With such a range of social support networks, it is perhaps then not surprising that 85% of the survey respondents felt that they had fitted back well into the daily life style since they returned to China for work, despite their feeling different from others around them.

### *Cosmopolitan competence*

The practice of everyday transnationalism through embeddedness in a range of networks contributed to the development of cosmopolitan competence among the returnees. They demonstrated strong awareness of this, and perceived it as a potential asset in the workplace valued by their employers.

### *Broadened worldview*

Over time, the value of their study-abroad experience became increasingly appreciated by themselves, particularly in terms of their intellectual insight and their broadened world view. For example, 92% believed their work benefitted from the intellectual development that they gained while studying abroad – regardless of the difference in their ages, length of stay in the UK or China ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, those who funded their own studies (50%) were more likely to appreciate such development compared with their peers who were on scholarships (44%) or funded by their parents/relatives (42%) ( $p < 0.05$ ). The following quote from Zeng provides further narrative evidence of the value of both subject knowledge and generic skills developed during the study-abroad experience.

Now, I'm able to live on my subject knowledge, skills and expertise, which I would not have been able to when I finished my undergraduate study in China. With two postgraduate degrees and work experience abroad, I can completely stand up on my own feet.

### *International awareness*

In addition, international awareness was rated by close to all as a quality that was significant to their work (93%), and this was despite the difference in their professional personal backgrounds (e.g. age, length of stay in the UK or China, funding sources of their study). The responses indicated that this cosmopolitanism while partly a matter of outlook also brought with it a range of marketable skills. In the interviews, 30-year-old Qian told us that,

The way I think about a question, compared with my colleagues, is more international. Also, I tend to take into account a wide range of factors in decision making. . . . Besides, we seem to have different mind-set about travelling. The company I'm working for requires a lot of overseas travelling. For me, it's simple and natural – just pack and get on the plane. But for others, especially those who have never landed on a foreign land, it seems to be a complicated thing to do.

Occasionally, this put them at odds with their Chinese workmates. Close to half (44%) of the survey respondents felt that their colleagues treated them differently, especially among those in their twenties. However, most of the interviewed returnees told us that they were happy to speak their minds despite resistance and occasional bemusement from colleagues. Many referred in some way to changes in their 'thinking patterns'; as 34-year-old Ning who funded his own Masters' study in the UK put it: 'My thinking pattern is more flexible and I look at things from different perspectives and more comprehensively. I feel there are more different ways of looking at the world and everything in it'. Similarly, 27-year-old Wen, who was supported by her parents, felt that 'compared with academic achievements, I think the change in the world view and ways of thinking is more important and fundamental'. She was proud of her ability to 'approach problems at a different level and from a different aspect'.

I think there are a lot of differences between my colleagues and me. I think I am more polite, considerate and thoughtful than they are. As for those colleagues who have never been abroad, they seldom consider other people's feelings and do things in a more straight or less polite way.

### *Efficacious and confident professional*

Primary motivations and ambitions for many in studying abroad were the opportunity to 'gain an insight into western people, especially their ways of thinking and living' (Ze, male, 35 years old), to 'upgrade my qualifications' (Dan, female, 27 years old) and to 'improve my English' (Wen, female, 27 years old). This focus helped them to develop the aptitudes they sought. Upon their return to China, doors were opened and many expressed increased confidence, enhanced self-efficacy and positive attitudes in the workplace, particularly in terms of (i) improved English language skills (92%); (ii) increased ability to deal with change and initiatives (88%), work under pressure (85.3%) and take on leadership at work (78%); (iii) a more flexible attitude towards work (80%); and (iv) better time management and self-planning skills (75%). Differences in their personal and professional backgrounds (e.g. age, length of

stay in the UK or China, sources of funding for their studies) did not seem to have made a difference to their perceived achievements in these areas ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Our previous research (Gu *et al.*, 2010) demonstrated how ‘learning shock’ was the greatest and least expected challenge in the early stages of international students’ studies, but that, over time, they came to value the interactive teaching and learning approaches and the emphasis on independent and critical thinking. In particular, as the results of the survey show, with negligible variation related to the difference in their backgrounds, the large majority of the returnees appreciated (1) greater independence in analysing and solving problems (96%), with one in three (34%) in strong agreement with this change; (2) more confident and positive attitudes towards life (89%); and (3) increased ability to think creatively (81%) and critically (88%) ( $p > 0.05$ ). The data from the interviews suggests that these effects are lasting. For example, 30-year-old Qian reported,

The most important thing that I’ve learned is that there is a logical way of thinking, a sensible way in which we construct an argument and make a point. This is also, in my opinion, the difference between UK education and Chinese education. Chinese education teaches students knowledge whilst UK education trains us to think.

While there was not always scope for all the returnees to express these new competences and this new confidence on a daily basis in their present place of work, these constitute resources upon which they would always be able to draw: ‘Everything I’d done, studying, working, travelling around Europe and making friends from the globe, would be treasured in my life’ (Wen, female, 27 years old).

#### *Communication skills and intercultural empathy*

In terms of skills, linguistic competence is clearly an asset perceived to be of critical importance to the returnees, and given the global dominance of English and its growing importance in China (Nunan, 2003; Hu, 2005) communicative fluency was highly valued. Irrespective of the differences in their backgrounds, the vast majority (81%) of the survey respondents felt more confident about their communication skills ( $p > 0.05$ ). As an extension of this, some of the interviewees noted a deeper understanding of the nature of language and communication. Chu, 56 years old, for example, noted that in his view, ‘... to translate is to get meaning across, not the words. However, such an idea couldn’t be accepted by other Ministers’. He also notes that ‘A deep exchange will witness the difference between me and those who are generally good at this language’. Working with foreign nationals in the Chinese workplace is also becoming more common, and it is partly a question of language but also, as Ning reported, a kind of intercultural empathy that is in particularly high demand in international or joint Sino-foreign capital ventures:

The study-abroad experience has changed the course of my life. ... My present boss is an Englishman. My experience in Britain makes it easier for me to communicate with him. ... With the knowledge of the English language, the culture and the people, I can better understand my boss’s decision and his ways of thinking. Now there are two groups of employees in our company: one with the overseas experience and the other without. The former group find it easier to understand their western colleagues whilst the latter often

experience conflicts and misunderstandings. I don't mean foreigners are always right, but that they do have different ways of thinking.

For others, their cosmopolitan lifestyle led to an everyday transnationalism that was an asset to some companies. While living in China was a priority for most, for personal, family or career reasons, there was evidence that some sought out international companies and there was a clear status-consciousness in terms of globally-successful businesses and their ways of working. This included their 'management systems, employee training and even social responsibility' (Bo, male, 27 years old) compared with local or smaller enterprises.

What is clear from the evidence so far is that the development of cosmopolitan competence is both an ambition and a by-product of study abroad, and is reported by these respondents to be demanded by some employers.

### *Identity transformation*

Given the nature and extent of the developments explored above, identity transformation would seem inevitable. Again, the returnees demonstrated a reflexive awareness of this change, which included a sense of being distinctly and permanently different from others around them in the workplace and their local networks. Returnees were virtually unanimous in noting the changes in themselves, which came in many guises. Eighty-five per cent of the survey respondents, for example, reported broadened interests in life. Some interviewees reported transformations were about a different attitude to and in work, including a strong sense of their own capacities and a willingness to use these. Confidence gained from the challenges of the study abroad experience and the valuing of gained knowledge and skills struck at the heart of returnees' self-concepts, and ways of living and working: 'I am an employee who knows both himself and the needs of the employer' (Qian, male, 30 years old).

As we have reported in previous studies (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Gu *et al.*, 2010), it is the agency of individuals in navigating the challenges of study abroad that is of the greatest importance in personal development experienced. The returnees in this study reinforce this finding and suggest its sustainability over time.

I hope to start my career from a better position. A big city like Beijing provides us with a wider horizon and enables us to access a greater variety of people, which I think is an advantage for my personal development. I'm not fearful about ups and downs in my life and I don't want to lead a stable life when I am still young. There may be challenges in my present life, but because I am trying my best, I won't be regretful whatever the outcome is. (Qian, male, 30 years old)

As we have reported before, for returnees like Qian and Ze, a period abroad and the attendant exposure to new and different ways of life and of living 'make the familiar strange' and can be a platform for a reflexive process that helps to nurture the self-transforming individual. As Ze concluded:

I have changed somewhat, but it is not the experience of studying abroad that exerted influence on me, but the reflection I had done myself. As you know, apart from learning, I spent a lot of time reflecting on the weaknesses in my previous ways of working and dealing

with people. So in fact, I just made good use of the time while staying in Britain to reconsider my past . . . .

In a similar vein, 30-year-old Zeng discusses trying to compare the ‘imagined me, staying in China’, with his present, more cosmopolitan self, to understand the differences.

Many of the above transnational transformations can be summed up in this quotation from Wen, on her feelings upon returning to China after a year and a half in the UK:

In a year and a half of study abroad, the friendship between my friends and I was very firm. . . . On the one hand, I felt lost, feeling I was leaving everything behind there, including friendship, that pure life style. On the other, I felt afraid, afraid of what awaited me in Beijing, whether everything would be all right here as I expected. What’s more, I had hope, hoping to lead a different life with changes. This change was a change in role. I felt I was more often than not in need of help during my stay in England, being regarded by a lot of people as an international student who needed help rather than a real friend. The role I wanted for a change was to help others with my knowledge and accumulated experience.

## Conclusion

This research has extended understandings of international students’ perceptions and transformations beyond their period of study to their resettlement into a home country that they see with new eyes. The experiences of the Chinese former international students in this study, despite spanning three decades and stemming from very different personal biographies and professional backgrounds, reveal strong patterns that point to their own agency as a key driver for the profound shifts of insight, skill and identity. They also point to transnationalism as a highly appropriate analytical framework.

Transnationalism as a framework for the study of international students helps to lift the topic above the important but narrow questions of their academic, practical and emotional adaptations while studying abroad, situating them in human migration flows in a context of increasing global interconnectedness. For example, the diversity of networks in which these students have become embedded speaks to the transnational nature of their experiences. The networks are both real and virtual and home and abroad. These networks are not only the natural consequences of a period immersed in a different environment. Their diversity stems from the nature of that environment – that is, the UK university – as transnational in itself; and for many who return to places like Beijing and Shanghai, their diversity may be further reinforced by the transnational nature of their work and rapidly changing social environments. The networks form an important source of practical and emotional support for the individual, facilitating both re-integration into the home environment and a sustainable sense of international possibilities.

They also reinforce the cosmopolitan competences gained during study. What is apparent from studying these international students as transnational subjects is the importance to them of the skills, knowledge and attitudes that they acquire through the combination of their academic experiences and living abroad. These are



personally significant to them in terms of a broadened outlook and a reflexive understanding of themselves in the wider world. Importantly, they also constitute marketable attributes that they believe employers value.

All of the profound changes that these students undergo as a result of the transnational nature of their experiences are ultimately changes in identity, in its personal, enactment, relational and communal layers. They see themselves differently, as both Chinese (and proud of that) and 'other' (and proud of that too). They are able to enact the meaning of this identity in the workplace through the skills that they have learnt and their everyday comfort in using them, and in interpersonal and intercultural relationships. They relate to a wider range of people both individually and as part of a range of communities within which their identity feels secure.

The patterns of migration found in these students is a reminder that migration can be transient and that when researching over cultural boundaries class-based *habitus* theories have limited capacity to explain how transmigrant individuals from diverse socioeconomic and class backgrounds have experienced similar struggles and transitions during their study-abroad periods. For most international students, study abroad is for a fixed period, to an environment designed (at least in part) to accommodate them, and for a particular set of purposes different from the motivations of migrant labour. All of these have implications for the nature of their network affiliations, for the long-term application of the skills, knowledge and attitudes they have acquired, and for their identities as Chinese and cosmopolitan citizens. This study has shown that both the original and new identities are sustainable over time, with the support of diverse networks.

A remaining question, given the scale of Chinese student transnationalism, is whether the *en masse* homecomings and infiltrations into the workplace and social networks of China by these elite cosmopolites will have social or political effects. Much of the literature on transnationalism is concerned with such potential transformations. This study did not set out to explore this. Indeed, the cause and effect conundrums of understanding the impact of returnees and disentangling this from the wider effects of globalisation in all its manifestations and the opening of China to the world more generally would be a massive methodological challenge. However, many of the returnees made reference to the increasingly international nature of the job market and workplace. Qian, for example, working at a university, noted this direction within the higher education sector, and the familiarity of current students with western cultures. Most of the interviewees noted how China had changed even in the period they were abroad, particularly in terms of material developments and business expansion and internationalisation.

The findings have implications for higher education institutions. Universities in the UK will no doubt see great value in these findings as they continue to make recruitment of international students a top priority, including those from China. It was certainly not our purpose to create marketing opportunities, but there is no doubt that the transformations reported by these returnees are highly valued by themselves in terms of their personal development, their diverse networks of associates, and their employability. Employability being so high on the agenda makes the perceived valuing of international study by employers of particular interest. However, there are salient specific lessons about study abroad experiences, of which receiving higher



education institutions could usefully take note. The individual agency exercised by the respondents in developing these networks, outlooks and competences is laudable and central to their personal growth, but universities might wish to consider what more could be done to support these personal initiatives at the institutional level during and after studies. As the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) and our previous analyses (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009) have noted, institutional support can facilitate intercultural understanding and therefore the positive outcomes reported here, but it is not reported consistently by respondents in our studies. All arriving students (home and international) could benefit, for example, from knowing in advance that the challenges of adaptation lead to long-term gains. Well-managed interactions can facilitate positive intercultural encounters and the development of an open outlook. Pedagogy is a key factor in the transformation of individuals, and tutors' understanding of the demands of this adaptation process could ease the transition while ensuring that students experience equality and empathy during their studies. Alumni networks are both formal and informal and universities are well-placed to help former students to benefit from these, and to sustain benefits themselves. Equally, there are important questions concerning how the benefits of these experiences can be extended to home students and how the possibilities offered by transnationalism might be integrated into their experiences.

As this study has shown, the analysis of transnationalism at the interface of the global and the individual has much to learn from international students as an important group of migrants. Their numerical significance is clear and is growing. How this will translate into supply and demand for intercultural skills and for workers comfortable in transnational lifestyles, and how the cumulative impact of individual identity shifts and diverse networks will affect social and political change over time, constitute important future research agendas.

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