

Homeland Integration: An Academic Returnee's Experiences in Chinese Universities

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Abstract

In this study, the first author narrates his experiences of the challenges of integration into several Chinese universities as a PhD graduate after returning from Australia. His patterns of communication and psychological changes are examined in terms of identity construction and transformation. His insider position as a Chinese native and academic returnee enables him to see the realities of practice in average Chinese universities at close range, yet with the altered vision gained from his overseas experience. This study highlights the challenges for academic returnees in Chinese higher education institutions and may also have resonances for academic returnees in other countries. Wider questions about the assessment of English research writing and the attitudes to academic returnees in Chinese universities are raised, contributing to debate over the future development of Chinese higher education institutions in a globalizing world.

Keywords

academic returnees, homeland integration, reverse culture shock, cultural identity, Chinese universities, autoethnography

What is already known?

Theories of culture shock and of cultural and national identities are widely used to interpret the issues experienced by sojourners and returnees. It is held that sojourners are likely to suffer from culture shock when returning to their home culture, yet eventually they will return to their previous views and behaviors.

What this paper adds?

This paper narrates the first author's experiences of the challenges of integration into several Chinese universities as a PhD graduate after returning from Australia. It highlights the challenges for academic returnees in China and may also have resonances for academic returnees in other countries. It contributes to debate over the development of Chinese higher education institutions in a globalizing world.

Introduction

Ch'ien Chung-shu, a famous Chinese academic and a writer, describes the life of a returnee named Fang Hung-chien in China in the 1940s, after he had lived for a few years in European countries as an international student. Ch'ien (2003) uses this vivid metaphor to describe subtle changes in returnees, which are not reflected in the homeland environment.

... returning home after studying abroad was like water on the ground turning to vapor and rising to the sky, then changing again to rain and returning to the earth, while the whole world looked on and talked about it. His returning home from thousands of miles away hadn't raised a single fleck of froth on the sea of his fellow countrymen. (p. 32)

While I (the first author) was away and when I returned home, my life was as Ch'ien describes. I experienced many complicated psychological changes, and these changes pushed me to reflect upon my life in Australia and reconstruct my identity in the home space. Many times I wanted to write this article, but I told myself to calm down and keep observing myself, so that I could see my changes more clearly. People often asked me,

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“have you really changed after you stayed in Melbourne for a couple of years?” To me, this was either a joke or a greeting, and I did not know how to respond them. I imagined that outsiders were looking at me as if I were a drop of water on the ground, moving to the sky, and now back to earth again.

After teaching English as a Foreign Language (hereafter EFL) for about 8 years at University X, I felt bored and wanted to experience a different life. I then went to Australia to do my doctoral research in March 2010. During my candidature, when reading some literature on English-language learning and identity construction (Ha, 2009; Miller, 2000; Norton & Gao, 2008), I began to see that “language is closely associated with the self” (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008, p. 266), and it is not only a linguistic system but also is “a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated” (Norton, 2008, p. 45). I understood that the underlying reason for me to leave China was to change my selfhood, after having practiced EFL learning and teaching for a long time in China. Before arriving in Australia, I had imagined that I would experience a comfortable life there; however, as a sojourner and an international research student, my everyday life in the host space was full of stress, worries, anxieties, negotiations, and homesickness. In April 2014, after being awarded a PhD degree, I decided to return to University X, where this story begins in earnest.

Before returning to my homeland, I thought that I had achieved a hybrid identity in Australia by using and learning English every day, since language learning can be regarded as “a site for belonging” (Higgins & Stoker, 2011, p. 399), and that my hybrid identity would help me to live in-between cultures in my future life, no matter where I lived. I therefore imagined that I would be able to integrate easily into my home space, as a chameleon with “identity capital” (Ho & Bauder, 2012, p. 281). Yet back home, I could not calm down for about 2 years and was beset by worries and anxieties. I was like an untamed animal kept in an iron cage; very often I was angry, but had to keep quiet, conditioned by the codes of Confucianism such as obedience and respect for authority. I began to question whether I had achieved a hybrid identity in Australia, and this added to my conflict. I had believed that when sojourners return to their home space, they would still have access to their primary identity, which would help them to settle down. Yet, when I considered my identity in China, I found that it was difficult or impossible to go back to my previous position.

This study is framed by theories of reverse culture shock and cultural and national identity. We review the previous literature regarding academic returnees, including some related to returnees’ integration into Chinese higher education institutions. Then, the framework of this study is addressed, and the use of autoethnographic narrative as an inquiry mode is explained. My personal experiences of integration as an academic returnee in several Chinese universities are narrated, and I argue for more attention to be given to academic returnees in a globalizing community.

Relevant Literature

Nowadays, more and more young Chinese students choose to receive quality higher education in developed Western

universities, and some of them choose to return to China after completing their course. Recently, some scholars have analyzed Chinese students’ complicated identity negotiations and construction in host spaces before they return to their homeland (Ai, 2015a; Cheung & Xu, 2015). Others have focused on the reintegration and adaptation of returnees when returning home (Chang, 2010; Chiang & Liao, 2008; Erdal & Ezzati, 2014; Kartoshkina, 2015; Ma & Pan, 2015). For instance, an investigation into the experiences of Chinese mothers interacting with their children who returned after several years of studying abroad found that Chinese mothers were uncertain about how to understand and interact with their culturally transformed children; therefore, the author suggests that more open and direct communication may be conducive to resolving relational conflicts during reentry and aiding reintegration (Chang, 2010). Another study reveals practical factors affecting returnees’ decision to return, their contribution to specific areas, and obstacles that limit their contribution and career opportunities in China (Ma & Pan, 2015).

Other scholars (Gill, 2010; Hao & Welch, 2012; Zweig & Han, 2010; Zweig & Wang, 2013) have examined returnees’ employment status in China. It is noted that the Chinese government lays considerable emphasis on recruiting high-skilled returnees (Hao & Welch, 2012). In general, there is a move to attract more academics to return to China to pursue their career, and the era of talent return is emerging (Wang, 2004). The prime incentive for return of academics is better career prospects resulting from the rapid expansion of China’s economy. It is reported that China has turned a brain drain into a brain gain (Zweig, 2006); it has not yet attracted “the very best of the Chinese scientists and academics who studied and lived overseas to return fulltime” (Zweig & Wang, 2013, p. 590).

Some scholars have also given attention to the transnational mobility of academics in the higher education sector (Gimenez & Morgan, 2014; Leung, 2013; Uusimaki & Garvis, 2016). The opportunities and challenges faced by academic returnees in the field of management research in a Chinese university are examined and it finds that, although opportunities are abundant for returnees, they still face “the choice between developing internationally transferable assets and building locally embedded competences” (Xu, 2009, p. 27). Meanwhile, in Chinese higher education institutions, transnational capital in general tends to be viewed as intellectual know-how in the technical sense, and it seems that most returnees find jobs and rewards; however, a lot of frustrations are felt by returnees in the humanities, since “the liberal arts and humanities have been seen more as spiritual pollution than useful knowledge” (Louie, 2006, p. 14).

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of authorities and higher education policy makers in China and other countries of the complicated identity negotiations and psychological changes faced by academic returnees in their daily practice in universities. I, as an academic returnee focusing on English-language education, feel that my transnational capital is not readily recognized in China. My narrative presents some of my experiences on return and reflects on policies

appropriate to helping academic returnees reintegrate into Chinese higher education institutions in an era of globalization.

Theoretical Background

Culture Shock

A theory relevant to studies of return to home space is culture shock. In general, culture shock has been theorized to fall into four *U*-shape stages—honeymoon, hostility, humor, and adaptation; sometimes “individuals differ greatly in the degree in which culture shock affects them” (Oberg, 1960, p. 143). The *U*-shaped curve was later revised as a *W*-shaped curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Trifonovitch, 1977) by adding reverse culture shock (Gaw, 2000) for those sojourners returning to their home space. That is, sojourners are likely to suffer from culture shock again when they return to their home culture, yet eventually many sojourners will return to their previous views and behaviors.

After I returned to University X, my communication behavior and psychological changes reflected reverse culture shock. However, I suspected that my reverse culture shock was a reaction to more than Chinese culture and that it was related to the current university system and its level of opening and degree of internationalization. My case may challenge the theory of reverse culture shock in its implication that one’s identity (re)construction in the home space may not be entirely successful, and it may not naturally calm down and describe a *U*-shape.

The Influence of Cultural and National Identity

My return to homeland is closely related to my cultural and national identity. Identity is constructed by one’s communication and education practices; it is impossible to eliminate one’s cultural and national identity. Cultural identity is a sense of belonging to a culture or ethnic group, and it is constructed in a long and gradual process. One’s cultural identity construction involves “learning about and accepting the tradition, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structure of a culture” (Lustig & Koester, 2010, p. 142). Cultural identity emerges from a particular culture that gradually forges one’s self; it is developed through practices that are part of everyday communication. National identity is not fixed at birth or tied to one’s birth; rather, it is “forged, or instilled in individuals growing up in particular places and times” (Block, 2007, p. 29). National identity “affects how you behave, your expectations, your relations with others and, more importantly perhaps, other’s relations with you” (Eaglestone, 2002, p. 109). In addition, it is connected with social, cultural, and educational experiences.

Some scholars have studied the associated topics of migration, transnational citizenship, and immigrants’ sense of home in foreign countries (Christou, 2011; Smith, 2007; Vertovec, 2004). They have found that migrants do not simply assimilate into the host country and break off ties with their contacts in the

home country; instead, they often maintain strong social, cultural, and political relationships with their homeland (Bilgili, 2014). Many migrants tend to experience a complicated “dual ambivalence” (Kivisto & Vecchia-Mikkola, 2013, p. 201) in their search for belonging. In their mobility, their emotions are complicated and their sense of “home” may be fluid and retrospective, looking back to the places that hold “considerable social, psychological and emotive meaning . . .” for them (Easthope, 2004, p. 135). At the same time, they may gradually identify with aspects of the host culture, and so their identity is fluid and ambivalent. In another paper, I narrate my own experience as a Chinese international student achieving a dual sense of home when staying alone in Australia, living in-between cultures and negotiating multiple identities, some familiar, some new (Ai, 2015b). When immigrants reenter their homeland, where they are once more affected by their cultural and national identity, they must readjust and negotiate their reentry, reconstructing their identity in a familiar but strange space. The home space that they return to may not have changed as much as they have, so there are bound to be ambivalences and feelings of disorientation and misfit.

Before returning to China, I experienced intense identity negotiations, until eventually my cultural and national identity defeated my desire to stay overseas, and I decided to return home. At that time, I was optimistic about my future, since it was reported that every year some Chinese universities would go to Western countries to recruit quality talents. However, when I sat in the plane returning home, I was not sure about my future at all. As a professional focusing on identity research, I had some psychological preparation for the coming reverse culture shock and having to let go of my attachment to Australia. Although I suffered a lot from the stress of doing my thesis and missed my homeland very much during my candidature, I did not expect to have such difficulties when I reentered my home space. The stories of my difficult reentry provide data for this study and inspire me to hope that higher education policies supporting academics who return to China can be informed by studies such as mine.

Autoethnography as Method

As an autobiographical genre, autoethnography in the social sciences is a relatively young and contested field but becomes increasingly common in a range of disciplines (Denshire, 2014); it “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Autoethnography allows “the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon” (Wall, 2006, p. 146). An autoethnographer “retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences” (Johnson, 2013, p. 29), informed by and building upon a sociocultural understanding. In autoethnographic narrative, one’s data are both personal and theoretically informed, as “what we choose to write and how we choose to write it is constructed based on the ways we

understand the world, our practice and ourselves” (Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003, p. 5).

In this study, I use autoethnographic narrative to critique and theorize my personal experiences as an academic returnee in Chinese universities. In doing so, I focus on the “scene and plot” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 8) to recall “small stories” (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 122) and examine my communication behaviors and psychological changes during the past 2 years. My narrative aims to help people to understand how and why academic returnees struggle in average Chinese universities. I have waited for over 2 years since my return to China to recover from the effects of reverse culture shock before writing this account, since as a trained researcher, my objective is to write a balanced narrative reflecting on past experience, framed by an understanding of culture and identity, to benefit other academic returnees and inform internationalizing higher education practices in China, and where relevant, in other countries.

Stories of an Academic Returnee in Chinese Universities

“Academia encompasses two interrelated fields—research and teaching” (Blais, Motz, & Pychyl, 2016, p. 1). As an academic returnee, my life was tied to both fields at University X. Like thousands of returnees, I wanted to contribute to my university and to be accepted; but some events made me feel that I will always be placed as an outsider. The following reflections are a snapshot of an academic returnee’s psychological journey through returnee culture shock.

Emotional Conflicts on Return to China

As mentioned before, most sojourners reentering home space experience reverse culture shock, feeling uneasy, anxious, and stressed. A diary entry written after I returned to China illustrates these symptoms:

All the school staff members were summoned to attend a meeting this morning. The meeting was as usual a monologue by school leaders, and some items were not relevant to me at all. At the end of the meeting, Deputy Party Secretary Wang, who is in charge of students’ affairs, told us that this semester three students had been found to have mental diseases. One was psychosis, one was schizophrenia, and another one was hypochondria. Hearing this, I whispered to my colleague Ivy, “I have had all three diseases after I returned to China.” She looked at me with surprise and laughed.

I did feel stressed and anxious, as I did not know how to reintegrate into University X, although very often it was not easy to identify the sources of my stress. Two years on, I think that at that time the stress came from my fear, since I wanted to be accepted as an academic returnee by my colleagues. I wanted to show my employers and colleagues a different self with research skills and research outputs earned in an English-speaking country. However, when I returned home with a PhD

degree and not many published papers, a sense of being recognized was elusive. I knew that people around me were expecting me to produce quality papers as an academic returnee, which stressed me. In retrospect, the stress was a normal facet of reverse culture shock. However, at that time, with an identity shaped in Australia as well as in my home country, I could not easily adapt and integrate into my new life in China. My own self-expectations and those of others were among many stresses I experienced.

Working as an EFL Lecturer

In the week following my return, I was assigned to teach an EFL course for a cohort of undergraduates. Inspired by the methodology of “communication language teaching” (Brown, 2002, p. 244), I applied the concepts of third space and hybrid identity to my teaching practices and urged students to speak in English in class and to prepare their questions in English and discuss them with each other. To me, this course was successful, since I noticed that most students enjoyed engaging in conversation and the exercises. However, in the middle of this course, several students dropped out and complained to me that this course did not focus on English vocabulary and grammar, like their regular EFL course, and this would not be helpful for their examinations. Some students told me that they enjoyed this course, but my model of teaching, based on Western concepts such as third space and hybrid identity, could not be promoted, since in China most students were placed by their examination score. This was the first lesson that I learned from my students after returning, and I began to wonder whether other Western theories and pedagogies that I had learned would be accepted in the future.

Continuing My Academic Journey?

In addition to my teaching load, I hoped to focus on research work, as this was one of the most competitive strands of recognition as a university researcher and lecturer. I thus proposed setting up a research center to cooperate with colleagues, but this was refused by my Dean, Professor Kevin. He told me that in my school not many teachers wanted to do research. I was surprised to hear this, since Kevin was a respected professor before he took his administrative position. Later, I understood that as Dean, his priority was to seek more joint projects for the internationalization of University X, but I was not sure why he did not support my proposal for pushing the research work of my school.

I decided to do research alone, yet I found that I could not access the English research data at the library, since University X as a provincial-level university did not purchase the data from the Western presses and publishers. I could not read the latest journal articles released by international academic presses such as Sage and Taylor and Francis. Also, I was told that international journals, if not indexed by Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), were not highly valued at University X. However, I still wanted to write papers in English, as my

previous research training in Australia was done in English. I encouraged myself not to care about this policy, as doing research should not be utilitarian. I consider that a nonnative English novice scholar needs to go through a process of growth, and I need to start by publishing non-SSCI papers first so that one day I can achieve the ability to publish SSCI papers.

Soon, a well-intentioned professor prompted me to switch my identity to that of a native scholar writing in Chinese; otherwise, he said, I as an academic returnee might not be competitive with local scholars. I understood that language is perceived as one of the foremost identity symbols, and that the Chinese language is a powerful expression of one's cultural and national identity. On hearing his advice, I stopped arguing but still kept writing in English, with the hope that one day my writing will be accepted internationally. Then, I may be accepted as an insider of the academic community in China, although my writing is in English. I know that such a journey will be tough, since as a nonnative English writer, I need to overcome more difficulties when writing in a foreign language. Yet I do not have another authentic choice to make. I could not persuade myself to give up English writing and write in Chinese. English writing has become a symbol of my identity as an academic returnee from Australia; I hope that by writing in English I can construct a new self in my home space.

Transferring to Another Chinese University

Recently in Chinese universities, doctoral education has become one of the largest higher education fields in the world (Yang, 2012), and doctoral graduates face intense competition in finding jobs. I dreamed that I would have a good future as a PhD graduate returnee, as I had read that China has taken measures to reverse the brain drain. I had imagined that I would join a good academic community at University X, yet I began to suspect that I did not have a future at University X, and I decided to leave. I sent my resume to the School of Foreign Languages of several average universities situated in my city. A few weeks later, University Y invited me to attend an interview. I considered this university to be better than University X, so I hoped to be successful in the interview.

At University Y, I was first told to sit an English proficiency examination. The paper consisted of two tasks—reading and writing, and I guessed that the purpose was to quickly identify the level of my English. After this, the interviewers gave me a short English text and asked me to read it aloud. I guessed that this was to test my English pronunciation. The text was on the relationship between Chinese university students and their foreign teachers from Western countries. Sitting before the interviewers, I read the text aloud, and then one interviewer asked me how I would react if a female university student often went to bars with a foreign male teacher in after-school hours. I was puzzled, but I guessed that this question was to test my moral standards as a returnee. Since I had returned from a Western country, they might think that I had adopted Western values. Indeed, this question was embarrassing to me, since one's private life should never be questioned on such a formal occasion;

I also felt that this question was not related to my research record at all. Even today, I don't know why they asked me this question in a formal interview. Previously, I had read that some foreign male teachers employed in Chinese universities would not necessarily be treated as teachers, and they even engaged in "sexual relationships with their students" (Stanley, 2013, p. 2). I felt that it was not suitable to mention these affairs. In order to answer this question, I had to respond that without any evidence that those teachers had broken a law, there would be nothing wrong for teachers and students as it was normal for them to have social interactions after school. However, I soon realized that my response sounded too blunt and even impolite, but it was too late to change.

Another interviewer asked me whether I, after working for University Y for a couple of years, would transfer to another university in the future, if University Y gave me an offer. I understood that, on the one hand, the interviewers were concerned that I might leave in the future, since in my resume they read that I had worked at two universities previously; on the other hand, they needed to know whether academically I was capable of undertaking the duties. However, I could not guarantee that I would work at University Y all my life, since today "urban social life has always entailed various mobilities" (Sheller & Urry, 2000, p. 739) and "mobility is an integral aspect of social life" (Easthope, 2009, p. 61). I was not sure what support I would get from University Y to develop a sense of belonging to the institution and continue my teaching and research work. Accordingly, I honestly replied that my future would be decided by how I was treated by University Y.

The last step of the interview was a mock teaching presentation. An interviewer gave me a short English article regarding culture shock and asked me to prepare for 20 min and teach it for another 20 min. In my demonstration, the interviewers acted as my students, and I did not focus on teaching the vocabulary and grammar, as most EFL teachers in China would do, but commented on the article as a research paper critically. I hoped that my critical comments would raise students' interests so that they would discuss the issues with each other, like those active students sitting in an Australian classroom. In fact, to help students to improve their critical thinking was a priority in my teaching ambitions after my return to China. I understood that it was risky to criticize others in a Chinese educational context; yet my academic training in Australia told me that it was essential for students to learn how to examine a text from different perspectives.

When the interview was over, I did not feel good and was not sure how they would treat me. I felt that University Y might not be a suitable place for me. Unexpectedly, the interviewers invited me to join University Y. After thinking about the process of the interview for a couple of days, I declined, since I felt that these interviewers were simply looking for a person to teach EFL, not a scholar. I wondered why they did not ask me any research questions but just asked me strange everyday questions. Later I got to understand that their questions were framed by the culture of Chinese higher education practices, in which harmony and stability are most important

characteristics; yet both harmony and stability are dynamic and do not exist in a fixed state. This interview made me realize that these interviewers might not be on the same track as me. If so, what was the point of my transfer? I had to give up this opportunity because there were too many doubts around it.

Becoming a Sojourner Again?

I sometimes wondered whether my return was a wise decision. If I had stayed in Australia, my part-time employer Tony, a Chinese Australian, would have sponsored me to migrate. Before I returned to China, I hesitated about my migration prospects, as I knew that many migrants including Tony suffered from the loss of their cultural and national identities in the host space, and experienced “ambivalence toward the homeland” (Kivisto & Vecchia-Mikkola, 2013, p. 198). I was very surprised when Tony once cried in front of me, telling me that he could never return to his motherland after having stayed in Australia for over 20 years, although he has become a successful businessman at Melbourne. He changed his family name into an English one, which meant that he had lost his formal cultural and national identities and become an Australian citizen. Recalling this, I felt that I could not migrate to Australia. Also, I was pressured to return by my parents in China, and I could not persuade them to agree to my migration. I, born and raised in China for over 30 years, have been forged into a Chinese person, and Chinese culture has affected me so deeply, and filial piety pulled me as a Chinese person to stay in my homeland.

However, with my reformed hybrid identity, I dreamed that I could escape from my university life in China and work in an Australian university. In 2015, I published four English journal articles and coauthored a book chapter with my PhD supervisor. On impulse I submitted my application to an Australian university, and was shortlisted and attended an online interview, but I was not selected. Again, I lost the chance to become an international sojourner, but I was not too disappointed. After calming down, I was not sure whether I really wanted to migrate to Australia and live a mobile life like some transnational academics in Australia. However, in this interview I got positive responses from my Australian peers, who consoled me that it is difficult to be shortlisted as a novice scholar. Hearing that, I was happy, since my writing in English was acknowledged, though I had failed the interview.

Discussion and Reflection

Two years after my return, I am still negotiating my identities. I had imagined that returning to my motherland would be sweet, but I am not able to find “an individual level space” (Ding, 2015, p. 270), and in the process of cultural and identity transitions, I often feel that my “home is not so sweet” (Sussman, 2000, p. 355). I know that my primary identity is that of an academic returnee in a Chinese university, but I feel that I am often regarded as an other. Many times I am unsure whether I can integrate into the Chinese academic community. Yet I am

clear that by writing English papers and only by this can I enter a world of research discourse and set up dialogues with my readers, though physically I am in a Chinese world.

Reentering my homeland, my psychological changes come in part from the enormous effects of reverse culture shock; but another factor is that some Chinese universities are not ready to receive academic returnees even though they are recruiting them, and they do not offer supportive conditions for academic returnees to do research work. For example, at University X my proposal for setting up a research group was labeled as irrelevant to their teaching, as their priority is to fulfill their everyday teaching responsibilities rather than encourage their staff to do research work. As I found in University X, there may be no access to international research data if the institution does not invest in the latest research data released by Western publication groups. Further, I found that there were no specific policies to support academic returnees’ research work, and some university administrators did not set up specific evaluation standards for publishing papers internationally. My publications in non-SSCI journal papers are not highly valued, but the fact that my job application was shortlisted at the Australian university is evidence that my writing in English is recognized in an internationalized academic community. In University Y, when I was asked to write a 200-word short English essay as a required job in the interview, I guessed that the interviewers might not know that in Australia a passed doctoral thesis is around 100,000 words long, and they might not know that I had passed an English-language proficiency test before I applied for PhD candidacy. During the interview, I was eager to discuss the future possibilities of research work with them, yet none of them asked me any questions related to my research work in Australia or my future plans. These experiences, though they may be perceived as merely one individual’s case, suggest that there is still a long way to go in recruiting academic returnees and assisting them to develop their research careers in Chinese universities. Moreover, some universities may not consider that academic returnees have much to offer, or at least they are unable to offer suitable conditions for them. Accordingly, processes for an effective dialogue between university administrators and academic returnees are needed as part of the internationalization process of average Chinese universities.

As I write this narrative article, I have transferred to another Chinese university, which is one of the key national universities located in Central China. After settling down, I successfully applied for a position as a post-doctoral research fellow in another key national university in Beijing. To outsiders, I may appear to have eliminated the influences of reverse culture shock, yet my identity negotiations never stop. Indeed, writing this article evokes and pushes my identity work as well, since I desire to enter an “imagined” (Norton, 2008, p. 48) community, to set up dialogues with people in the world of English. I am pretty sure that my identity struggles will continue, as I could not simply go back to an Australian space and integrate myself into the national and educational culture there. Affected by my transnational capital, I realize that we are all living in “liquid

times” (Bauman, 2007), full of uncertainties; indeed, “we are all living diasporic lives to a greater or lesser extent” (Stringer, 2008, p. 5), even within China. Yet I am sad that my fluid identities cannot be understood by people who have lived with a relatively fixed identity within a relatively stable social and cultural space in China.

Conclusion

Pulled by my cultural and national identity, I returned to serve my homeland without too much hesitation. Such a decision made me feel proud; yet after returning to my homeland, I and my family were often aware that I should keep quiet and not complain too much. I choose to write critical reflection about my experiences as an academic returnee in Chinese universities, with the hope of contributing to the development of higher education and research discourse in my homeland, and to throw light on the challenges of reintegration and identity reconstruction in a strange home space. My narrative, as a returnee, presenting the stories from bottom-up, is not intended to criticize or indeed offend people involved in the field of Chinese higher education, but rather to offer a small window on the internationalization level of average Chinese universities, and how this affects the ambitions of academic returnees who wish to be part of an international research discourse. My reflection may suggest avenues for the further opening and reform of Chinese universities; my personal stories may also explain in part why it is claimed that the current policies in China “have failed to attract first-rate academics to return” (Cao, 2008, p. 331).

After calming down, I often doubted my identity work in China: did I really achieve a hybrid identity in Australia? If yes, why couldn't I cross two cultural boundaries? I questioned the theory of reverse culture shock as well, as, according to this, I should have become comfortable once more with the mores of my home culture and returned to my earlier views. I am sure that many academic returnees are struggling with their shifting identities, and their struggle, as well as my identity work in China, will be an unfinished process, since identity is always “in the process of formation” (Hall, 1991, p. 47), and it is “always open to further development and transformation” (Gardiner, 2000, p. 49).

Entering globalizing times, the Chinese higher education system is “playing an increasingly important role in China’s knowledge economy and therefore in the global knowledge society” (Chen, 2012, p. 101). Some Chinese universities have speeded up their internationalization by establishing more joint projects with their international partners, sending more scholars overseas and receiving more overseas students. However, there are a number of challenges for Chinese universities to overcome in the process of internationalization. It is expected that academic returnees can contribute to developing an international research culture in Chinese universities. Yet managing academic returnees effectively so that they can stay in their homeland is problematic. The effectiveness or otherwise of Chinese universities’ attitude to academic returnees is a signal

to other academic scholars who are still negotiating their future living and working space, and this will affect the circulation of professional talents. My narrative reflects upon my personal experiences as an emerging scholar and my transnational identity construction, and on some of the challenges to the internationalization of average Chinese universities. I feel that returning academic talent is struggling to reach its potential in China; however, I am optimistic that the prospects for academic returnees and Chinese universities will continue to develop in an internationalized context of higher education.

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