

A sociological exploration of the impact of study abroad on international PhD students' self-identity

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of study abroad on the self-identity of Chinese doctoral students in the UK, with an emphasis on students' agency and identity through the lens of Giddens' (1991) reflexive project of the self'. Qualitative data comprising student perceptions and experiences of personal changes and development during their study abroad were collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews involving 11 participants. Three inter-related themes emerged from thematic analysis: how the students constructed narratives which helped them to actively negotiate new sociocultural and academic fields; their growth in independence; and the perceived changes that took place in values and worldview. The findings demonstrate that study abroad provides students with an opportunity for self-transformation and identity expansion.

Keywords: *Identity, Chinese students, Intercultural Communication, International Education, Giddens Project of the Reflexive self*

Introduction

Study abroad has become a global trend. The UK, for example, is now one of the principal destinations for international students, with the 80,000 Mainland Chinese students registered in the academic year 2013/14 constituting the largest group (UKCISA, 2015) and forecasts that by 2020 over 130,000 Chinese students could be studying here alone (Böhm, Follari, Hewett *et al.*, 2004). Correspondingly, the interest of researchers in study abroad is a growing phenomenon, which has attracted the attention in fields as diverse as anthropology (*e.g.* Oberg 1960), intercultural communication (*e.g.* Zimmerman 1995), international education (*e.g.* Durkin 2011; Gu. *et. al.* 2010), and psychology (*e.g.* Searle and Ward 1990; Ward *et. al.* 1998).

While Chinese students as a whole have received considerable attention, the experiences of doctoral students have been largely neglected. In this article, we set out to explore the experiences of this important group from a sociological perspective, using Giddens' (1991) reflexive project of the self as the lens, and focusing, in particular, on issues of agency and identity. We start by reviewing the relevant literature on Chinese international students and offering a justification for our choice of theoretical framework. We will next describe the methodology which guides our study before discussing the themes emerging from a narrative analysis of interview and focus group discussions which offer fresh insights on the impact of study abroad.

Previous studies on Chinese international students

Several themes emerge from the growing number of studies of Chinese international students. The first relates to general problems faced by Chinese international students. For example, Li (2007) and Edwards *et al.* (2007) explore the challenges faced by Chinese students primarily from the perspective of university teachers, considering, in particular, issues such as low levels of competence in English and pastoral care. In a similar vein, Holes (2004) reveals that Chinese international students in New Zealand universities lack discussion skills and have inadequate listening comprehension for academic study. They experience, for instance, problems with teachers' accents, idiomatic styles, humour and choice of examples in class; in academic writing, they are accustomed to indirect writing styles and lack experience in analysing the strengths and weaknesses of different arguments.

Many existing studies have been undertaken explicitly or implicitly within the framework of cultural studies (*e.g.* Abubaker 2008; Ding 2009) or acculturation theory (*e.g.* Berry 1997 2005), Rudmin 2003; Yu and Wang 2011; Furnham and Bochner 1982; Searle and Ward 1990; Ward and Rana-Deuba 1999; Ward *et al.* 2001), which define international education as a process of "adjustment" for international students to local requirements (Margrison, 2014:7). Assumptions are often made that cultural differences explain the 'problems' of Chinese students, often stereotyped as passive, surface learners who favour rote memorisation, lack critical thinking skills and are not comfortable in participating in classroom interaction or group work (*e.g.* Ballard and Clanchy 1997, Andrade 2006; Wong 2004; Biggs 1997; Burns 1991).

While many researchers react to the problematisation of cultural difference by emphasising the need for international students to adjust to local conditions, scholars such as Stephen (1997:115), recognise that this approach has 'a surface appeal', but argue that they 'should be seen as part of a historically situated and contested discourse'. In a similar vein, Dervin (2011) advocates a move away from culturalism towards a non-essentialist approach to the study of the acculturation of Chinese students (see also Feng, 2009), and a small number of studies focus on negative experiences, such as marginalisation, perceived discrimination, prejudice, stereotypes and racism (see, for instance, Brown 2009; Tian and Lowe 2009; Hsieh 2006; Brown 2009; Ding 2009).

Some researchers also draw attention to the danger of treating Chinese students as a homogenous group. Grimshaw (2007:308), for instance, suggests that "rather than accepting explanations of Chinese students that are based on exotic stereotypes, we should seek to relate to them first and foremost as people". This position is supported by Edwards and An (2006) and Ye and Edwards (2015).

Much of the previous literature has looked either at the impact of study abroad on students' linguistic and intercultural skills development (*e.g.* Alfred and Byram 2002 2006; Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Coleman 1998; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003), or at short-term language learning abroad (*e.g.* Kinginger 2009; Jackson 2008 2010; Lee 2009; Tang and Choi 2004). Only recently, have scholars such as Benson *et al.* (2012, 2013) started offering insights into language students' identity formation and negotiation in relation to study abroad

Finally, most studies of Chinese international students focus on Chinese undergraduate or Masters students (*e.g.* Wu 2014; Ding 2009). Chinese doctoral students, in contrast, have received very limited attention.

Theoretical framework

According to Giddens (1991:5), the reflexive project of the self "constantly works to sustain coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives". The emphasis, then, is on the role of narrative in understanding the Self, offering us a way to make sense of who we are. As Rose (1997:237) comments:

We use the stories of the self that our culture makes available to us, with their scenarios of emotions, their repertoires of motives, their cast-list of characters, to plan out our lives, to account for events and give them significance, to accord ourselves an identity as hero or

victim, survivor or casualty within the plot of our own life, to shape our own conduct and understand that of others.

The narrative created by an individual includes past memories and future plans in which private “stories” are shaped by the external sociocultural environment. For Lawler (2008:13), for instance, narrative “gives us a means to understand identity in its sociality, since narrative identity places us within a complex web of relationships [...]”.

It might be argued, of course, that “reducing” identity to narratives undermines their potential as a sense-making tool. In other words, narratives about ourselves are important “but they are not the full, lived experience of engagement in practice” (Wenger 1998:151). In contrast, proponents of narrative research recognise people as “self-articulated animals” (Taylor 1989), who make sense of life through articulating and reflecting upon their experiences. As Stivers (1993:412) points out:

The sense of self is an essentially narrative phenomenon; people conceive of themselves in terms of stories about their actions in the world, using them to make sense of the temporal flow of their lives. We find identity meaning as a result of the stories we tell about ourselves or that others tell about us. Therefore, a narrative approach to self-understanding is not a distortion of reality but a confirmation of it.

Self-identity, then, is created and maintained through self-reflexivity or continuous self-observation and self-introspection (Giddens 1991:243). This process allows past biographical narratives to be interpreted from the standpoint of the present; it also plays an important part in accommodating new experiences, events and information.

Research methodology

The methodology which guides this study is broadly constructionist and interpretive. In line with Giddens’ theoretical framework of identity and in the tradition of researchers such as Lawson (2010) who explore issues of identity formation, we use narrative to analyse our participants’ perceptions and experiences of study abroad, thus responding to the call of Araujo (2011) for more qualitative research to deepen our understanding of the needs of international students during study abroad.

Within the qualitative research paradigm, knowledge is linked to interpretation, meaning and illumination rather than generalisation, prediction and control, requiring researchers to provide “interpretation of others’ interpretations” (Bryman 2001:15). By the same token, “the researcher’s interpretations have to be further interpreted in terms of the concepts, theories and literature of a discipline” (Bryman 2001:15). Given the emphasis on how identity construction is bound to biographical experiences as reflexively understood by the individual, an interpretive epistemology is seen as the appropriate route to develop this line of enquiry.

As narrative inquirers, we share the belief that “experience happens narratively” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000:19) and narrative, as a particular form of linguistic articulation, offers us a way of adequately understanding the self, through which we make sense of who we are (Taylor 1989). The focus of narrative research is on the individual, and the fact that life can be understood through a recounting and reconstruction of the life story or biographical narrative. Bruner (1987:15) links experience and narrative with self-identity:

Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narrative achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and to purpose-build the very “events” of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives.

As narrative inquirers, we not only gather facts or “truths” about a participant, but actively construct interpretations of their experiences in the field, and then question how those interpretations come about (Hertz 1997). Like others working in this tradition, we treat personal stories articulated by individuals as knowledge which constitutes “the social reality of the narrator” (Etherington 2004:81).

The data for our analysis were gathered through focus groups and semi-structured interviews, conducted as part of a larger study (Ye 2014) with 11 Chinese PhD students (four males and seven females), aged between 26 and 39, from a range of disciplines (Applied Linguistics, Chemistry, Design Innovation, Education, Electrical and Electricity Engineering, Finance and Information Management and System). Although the selected individuals were homogeneous in terms of the stage of study and their origins, their diverse demographic characteristics help to build a fuller and more complete understanding of the identity formation of the group in question.

Four focus groups held were conducted in Mandarin in classrooms on campus with 11 participants, with each lasting approximately two hours. Following the focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews lasting between 60-90 minutes were undertaken to gather further information from all 11 participants, also acting as a way of triangulating the data. Interview questions were developed, in response to the findings of the focus group discussions, to cover students’ life history, academic challenges, language difficulties, as well as their ways of coping with these challenges and making sense of their own experiences. While enabling comparable questions to be asked across all interviews, participants were also able to raise other topics or themes. Interviews took place at times and in settings where participants felt comfortable to speak about important life issues (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). Interviews were conducted in Chinese to put participants at their ease and encourage freer communication. Because of the time-consuming nature of the task, only those sections of narrative later used as illustrative quotations were translated into English and verified by a second native speaker.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to facilitate the second phase of analysis, which aimed to investigate common themes and identify ‘critical experiences’ (Block 2007) across the whole data set. The inductive analysis (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:389) which follows was guided by the research question – what impact has studying abroad on participants’ self-identity’ the theoretical underpinnings; and the existing literature. The unit of coding was an “extended account” (Riessman 2000:7), which consisted of block interview quotes reflecting participants’ comments on a given topic. Member-checking and triangulation based on different data sources (interviews and focus group discussions) were used to ensure rigour; issues of reflexivity (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983), of particular importance given Ye’s insider status, were addressed throughout the study to increase credibility.

Findings and discussion

Studying abroad provides the chance to negotiate and fashion a new sense of self, through temporary attachments and continuous reflective redefinition (Giddens 1991). Three interrelated themes that recurred throughout the participants’ narratives are presented below: sociocultural awareness and self-reflexivity; independence; and self-development or transformation. The discussion will highlight how the participants interpreted their intercultural experiences in the UK and which issues they identified as significant to their self-definition. Bourdieuan concepts of capital (economic, social and cultural) and of habitus (or habits, skills, and dispositions deeply ingrained though life experiences) (see, *e.g.* Bourdieu & Passeron 1992) which will complement Giddens’ reflexive project of the self in interpreting the findings.

Sociocultural awareness and self-reflexivity

In Giddens’ words, “at each moment, or at least at regular intervals, the individual is asked to conduct a self-interrogation in terms of what is happening” (Giddens 1991:76). The practice of self-reflexivity thus helps individuals make sense of their daily life and maintain a feeling of ontological security. Self-reflexivity is also a crucial skill for interculturalists (Nagata 2004). Of particular relevance, times of transition can generate a heightened sense of reflexivity involving agency or the ability to act and realise one’s potential. In other words, events such as study abroad provide the reflexive project of the self with opportunities for personal development (Giddens 1991:79).

During their time in the UK, our participants, as reflexive agents, endeavoured to maintain a coherent sense of self. In order to make a successful intercultural transition, they actively negotiated the new sociocultural and academic fields. We consider below the two contrasting narratives of Weiwei and Zhiqiang and then the reflections of the cohort on their growing cultural awareness.

“It is because of who you are”

28-year-old Weiwei a final year PhD student specialising in international business, also worked as a teaching assistant, on which she offered the following reflection:

... on many occasions, I feel that I have been bullied by ‘foreign’^[1] students. It is not because of your English or your academic knowledge, it is because of who you are. Do you understand? I’ll give you an example. If a senior professor, like my supervisor, says something, this student won’t challenge them even though he does not agree. But if it were me, saying the same, he would challenge me for sure.

Although there is no way to know from this narrative what exactly happened in Weiwei’s class, it is noteworthy that she explicitly links her unpleasant experience to issues of identity, language and race, thus indicating that her reflexive awareness has reached the level of discursive consciousness (Giddens 1984). She was aware that she lacked cultural, linguistic and symbolic capital (cf. Bourdieu 1991) in the form of the native speaker proficiency and seniority highly valued in the new academic field, explaining that it is “not because of your English or your academic knowledge – it is because of who you are”. She felt that her cultural capital (in the form of subject expertise) was being discounted by her students. This story, then, emphasises the symbolic power held by native English speakers and established academics in the context of western higher education institutions.

From a Bourdieuan point of view, her negative feelings of being “bullied” by her students could be explained in terms her educational habitus. This had been acquired in a Chinese context, characterised by an authoritative teaching style, which differs in important respects from the rules of the new game, where an interactive and dialogic teaching style is favoured. During the interview, she referred to the differences between the two educational systems:

... In China, the teacher has absolute authority and students need to listen to whatever teachers say. This can influence the way you study, because you always think that the teacher is the authority. Then, of course, you will always follow the teacher during your studies, right?

It would be possible, of course, to attribute Weiwei’s negative feelings to the student challenge to her authority as a teacher and the mismatch with her expectations as the product of the Chinese system. However, she goes on to say,

... I don’t think it is because of my language - it may be because I am Chinese. I find that this occurs not only with new graduates like me, but also a lot of Chinese lecturers who have taught for a long time. “Foreigners” are all gone and there are only a few Asian faces left [in their classes] ... I feel maybe there is a little bit of discrimination. “Foreigners” think why you are teaching them? For example, for some senior Chinese academics, there are only a few Asian faces left in their classes and the Westerners are all gone.

Weiwei’s discursive construction of the Self as “Asian” and the Other as “Western” shows that she is conscious of sameness and difference, and the realities of racial inequality, thus providing support for Epstein’s (1993:18) argument that “from our earliest experiences in a racist and sexist society, we are invited to identify ourselves in these ways in relation to the opposite gender and/or race”. Weiwei continued,

Let's go back to what we have talked about previously. You should be tolerant and open-minded. For example, when I give students tutorials, I will simply do my best. How do other people judge? It is their business ... You must know that it is not your fault ... If I know that I have done nothing wrong, I feel okay. As for what other people want to do, you cannot do anything about it. Of course, not all the students are like that. Some of them are very nice, coming to your tutorials, asking you questions.

After making sense of what happened and coming to terms with her social disadvantage as a cultural “other”, Weiwei relied on the rhetorical tools of self-reassurance, such as “*you must know that it is not your fault*”, “*not all the students are like that*” and “*some of them are very nice*”, to sustain a feeling of self-integrity and pride. On this occasion, her emotional resilience and self-belief, guarded her from the perceived threat and helped her keep the narrative of becoming an academic going.

“I always reminded myself that two educational systems are different”

Zhiqiang aged at 32 takes a different approach. He is an applied linguist in the early stage of his academic career, having produced several publications. He studied Business English for his first degree and then gained an MA in English Studies (Applied Linguistics), both in Chinese universities. Before undertaking his PhD study in the UK, he worked as an English teacher for three years at a university in China. Like Weiwei, he had also been involved in teaching while studying. Unlike Weiwei, however, when he worked as a Teaching Assistant, he could think in more positive ways about his British students:

To be honest, for example, I have worked as a Teaching Assistant (in the UK) ... There was a training programme available for new staff in the university on how to run small group discussion, how to lead the students in class etc. During the training, I kept telling myself that I was now in an English classroom, different from a Chinese one. In China, you need to teach 40 minutes for a 45-minute lesson. Here, you may not need to teach 40 minutes. You can teach 20 minutes, and it is enough. You need to focus on student participation. I always reminded myself that the two educational systems are different.

... After a while I felt British students were very keen to acquire knowledge, but they do not blindly believe in you. During the class, they will raise their hands and ask you whenever they have a question. They will say, “I have a question here or I need clarification here”. This seldom happens in China. In China, students will take notes on whatever you say throughout the whole lecture. It seems that Chinese students may be afraid of the teacher or just blindly accept their authority. There are various reasons. In the UK, it is different. They will interrupt you in the class. Interruption is a kind of participation.

Adam’s account indicates a heightened awareness of the differences between classroom practice in China and the UK – “I always reminded myself that two educational systems are different”. It is apparent that his knowledgeability about pedagogy has reached the level of “discursive consciousness” (Giddens 1984:7). Thus, although both Zhiqiang and Weiwei were “interrupted” by their students in the classroom, they had very different reactions towards this behaviour. Weiwei felt that she was “bullied” by her students because they challenged her, whilst Zhiqiang treated the “interruption” as “interaction/participation” – an example of positive and “creative” thinking. This enabled him to put aside his authority as a teacher, helping him build “basic trust” in students and creating a sense of ontological security in the new field. It is also possible to argue that his empathy towards students, apparently generated from his heightened reflexive awareness of the different classroom pedagogies, helped to facilitate his successful intercultural transition and maintain the continuity of his biographical narrative. The different reactions of Weiwei and Zhiqiang also suggest that “we are, not what we are, but what we make ourselves” (Giddens 1991:75). Although both participants have a teaching assistant role, the beliefs/knowledge, emotions and narratives of their experience are very different. As such, it would seem that identity is “something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens 1991:52).

Becoming culturally aware

Collectively, the participants articulate a narrative of developing intercultural competence. As Gills (2007:197) comments, this involves “the capacity to be aware of and reflect upon the intercultural experience and the ability to develop insights into the self and the other through analysis and reflection”. From the standpoint of the present, 30-year-old design innovation student, Xiulian explains her intercultural encounters in the following way:

... Many students here are from all over the world. Actually, they are quite open-minded, willing to accept lots of things, including all sorts of cultures. They are not as conservative as we thought. Not at all. If you make any mistakes or have some misunderstanding in terms of different cultures, they won't mind too much. They are happy to correct you.

Xiulian's reflection demonstrates the changing perspective towards others developed through intercultural contact and self-reflexivity. She embraces and celebrates the diversity of the student body. Her openness towards otherness or *savoir être* (Byram, 1997) is manifested in the narrative of an “intercultural speaker” (Jackson 2011:82).

Participants' narratives also demonstrate their skills of *savoir comprendre* (Byram 1997), or the ability to interpret an event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to events from one's own. Thirty-nine-year-old Lanlan's account exemplifies this aspect of intercultural competence:

For example, Chinese people like to cook meals for their guests. When we invite someone for dinner, we don't go to a restaurant. I just bring the guests to my house and cook the meal for them. It was a great pleasure for me to do it and I believed this was the best way to return their kindness or help. I always did it whether for English people or Chinese people. Later on, I realised not all “foreigners” like it - it was just my wishful thinking. Not all “foreigners” like Chinese food. Some of them frankly told me how they struggled with it. When they visited China, they were invited to the top restaurants there, but they were still struggling with the food.

Other group members, such as Weiwei, a second-year chemistry student, demonstrated similar awareness:

In China, you will definitely speak in the Chinese way. However, in the UK you have to adopt the British way. For example, some British people believe Chinese people have no manners as they don't even say “thank you” when they get off the bus. Actually, it is habit rather than courtesy. In China if you say too many “thanks”, it is a bit hypocritical. People are not used to it. However, British people just love it, using it all the time.

Study abroad allows Weiwei to fully immerse herself in local culture, which helps her establish cultural awareness and build up intercultural communicative competence. Her reflexive account of British social norms, such as politeness, proves that she possesses not only the knowledge of “social groups and their products and practices in one's own and interlocutors' country” (Byram 1997), but skills and ability to interpret an event from another culture, to explain it, and relate it to events from her own. The time spent in the UK provides her with opportunities to gain exposure to novel “ways of being” (e.g. communication styles) and to use English outside the academic arena.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that our participants have developed critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) during overseas study, the “ability to evaluate critically and based on explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries” (Byram Gribkova and Starkey 2002:12-13, cited by Jackson 2011:82). Critical self-analysis was apparent in the comments of 28-year-old engineering student, Zhijun:

When I saw some new (Chinese) students talking to local people, I had the feeling that they were just fumbling for something to say. Maybe I used to be like that as well. They asked all

sorts of questions regardless of other peoples' feelings. They even asked some private questions, such as address, job and income etc. It was very annoying. I used to do it but at least I can read people to see whether other people like to talk to you or not. I think it has something to do with personality. You see, when I go to supermarket, sometimes I have a good chat with local people. We know each other, just like friends.

Through frequent intercultural contact with local people, Zhijun has gradually developed consciousness of the differences between his own or his fellow Chinese students' behaviours and those of the local people and understood the reasons behind intercultural misunderstanding (*savoir comprendre*). Zhijun arranged his narrative to position himself as an "intercultural speaker" who not only has empathy towards local people, but possesses critical self-awareness (*savoir s'engager*), thus indicating an ethno-relative mindset (Bennett 1993). In addition, becoming intercultural enables Zhijun to have positive overseas experience, which eventually increases his social inclusion, as he incorporates intercultural skills into his sense of self, and embraces his personal expansion.

Independence

The second most consistent theme is participants' belief that they have become more independent since arriving in the UK. When they reported their study abroad experiences in the UK, they constructed a narrative of agency and achievement, within which independence was a central motif. While living or learning in a new milieu, our participants managed to maintain a sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991), while using their own initiative. For example, second year student Xiaobing explained:

In terms of dependence, I can divide it into two parts: independent life and independent learning skills. Independent life means you have left your parents and must cook for yourself etc. Independent learning skills concern your study. Supervised by a tutor, you must do all the experiments by yourself. Previously in China, we were quite dependent. If there was anything not clear, we always went to ask the teacher, just like asking our parents at home. But here, the supervisor only gives you an outline, and you must think about it, generate results and analyse them. Apart from the hands-on experience, I feel my independent research skills have greatly improved.

Reflecting upon her experience in the UK, Xiaobing redefined her self-identity emphasising the development of independence, which indicates that "habitus embraces continuity and change" (Davey 2009: p.276). This independence concerns every aspect of her life, not just independent learning and research. As Xiaobing negotiated the new field, she also developed domestic skills such as cooking. At the same time, she accumulated cultural capital in the form of research capability which will be invaluable in her career development.

In a similar vein, the transition to a new environment in the UK has offered Xiulian an opportunity of becoming more independent in both her day-to-day life and study:

Simply speaking, it is all about your independent life. The academic study is pretty much the same. Let's talk about life. When I was in China, I never thought about things like electricity bills, water bills or opening a bank account etc. My parents sorted them out for me. So, when I'd just come here, everything was new, even the cash machine. I could not figure out how to use it. You cannot expect someone to tell you how to deal with all those things. You need to explore them by yourself.

Participants' reflections, then, support Gill's (2007) research on Chinese postgraduate students' intercultural learning in the UK, which highlights the relationship between independence and study abroad.

Perception of self-expansion or transformation

We consider next the perceived changes that took place in the participants' values and worldview because of academic learning and intercultural interaction in the UK. Participants reported personal growth and perspective transformation. For example, Lanlan highlighted processes of knowledge-acquisition and knowledge-construction:

After the experience of doing a PhD in the past few years, I gradually came to understand constructivism. That is, no matter how much you have understood the society or a particular question, you are always building up your own conception of world.

Similarly, Xiaobing described her perceived self-transformation at the cognitive level:

I think the only benefit for me is the experience of living abroad. Such an experience will certainly help me to remould my world view. I am not saying that people in China have an imperfect world view. However, for myself, if I had stayed in China all the time, I would not be able to view everything as objectively, comprehensively and inclusively as I am now.

Tolerance, acceptance, empathy and a holistic worldview are now important parts of her reflexively sustained self-identity. These findings are consistent with existing research on the impact of Chinese students studying abroad (see, for instance, Jackson 2011; Gills 2007; Stafford 2010). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that our participants' intercultural experience has been beneficial for knowledge (or capital) accumulation. Lanlan commented:

Also after 3-4 years' life in UK, I have seen lots of things which are invisible to people within China. It is a bit like climbing a mountain. When you stand at a higher position, you see a different landscape. This changes my world view. I can access lots of viewpoints here which are not available in China. They help you build up knowledge and intelligence. This is my feeling.

Another participant, third year finance student Bingbing, felt the same way. The “narrative of the self” (Giddens 1991) she reflexively constructed revealed the process of change in both her personal epistemology and her cognitive development (Piaget 1972):

Ye: Are one's personality and ideas still affected by the whole environment?

Bingbing: I think they are affected. After you experience something, you learn something new, or it changes the way you think. It is about a person's insight. When you go abroad, you are well informed, which changes the way you think. You learn lots of alternative ways to solve problems. If you stay in China, it is probably too difficult to learn all of these. This is my feeling.

Bingbing's comments can also be explained in terms of transformative learning, the “process of examining, questioning, validating and revising our perceptions of our experiences and the things we encounter in our own way” (Wang and King 2008:141). It is clear that Bingbing has undergone “perspective transformation” (Mezirow 1991) involves:

(a) an empowered sense of self, (b) more critical understanding of how one's social relationships and culture have shaped one's beliefs and feelings, and (c) more functional strategies and resources for taking action. (Mezirow 1991:161)

In a similar vein, Zhijun's journey as an international student provided him with an opportunity to broaden his horizons and, as time progressed, to become more and more confident, again indicating personal expansion:

I have achieved a lot (during my PhD study). I am more knowledgeable and confident now. During the last four years, I have had quite a few opportunities to attend conferences, including ones in Europe and America. I just feel the world is actually quite small. I am no longer frightened of going out. I won't be shy in front of foreigners. I am more confident academically as well.

He attributed what he perceived as his current level of sociocultural and academic development to the confidence he developed during his study abroad. In addition, his sense of empowerment suggests his personal transformation.

Conclusion

This study offers a novel way of understanding the impact of study abroad on international PhD students' self-identity, by addressing several issues underdeveloped in current research. Giddens' (1991) theory of reflexive self-identity emerges as a useful lens for analysis, privileging as it does students' agency. It allows us to demonstrate how participants reflexively create and maintain the biographical narratives, which construct their self-identity. Students' stories illustrate the various ways in which they negotiate the new intercultural field and forge their life trajectories. Significantly, these narratives move us away from the focus on student adaption to an exploration of agency and identity.

Our analysis suggests that the participants have actively dealt with the challenges of study abroad, accumulating various forms of capital, with far-reaching implications for their self-identity expansion and transformation. The findings thus resonate with Davey's (2009:276) observation that "habitus embraces continuity and change"; their newly accumulated capitals take the form of intercultural communicative competencies, such as tolerance and empathy; improved English proficiency; critical awareness shaped by changing perceptions of home and host cultures; enriched academic knowledge; and enhanced employability. In addition, their narratives indicate that their border crossing experience activates the process of self-reflexivity, allowing them to engage with their own self-exploration, and make sense of their daily encounters in a new sociocultural context. Through the practice of self-reflexivity, they gained new perspectives, and an appreciation of academic, cultural and social norms. Moreover, the findings suggest that heightened awareness, self-reflexivity and personal development are dynamic interrelated processes. The participants not only managed to maintain a coherent sense of self during, but developed their world views, intercultural and approaches to learning.

By the same token, listening to the stories of the participants can help inform institutional policy and practice which, in turn, will help improve PhD students' experiences and enhance their professional development. It therefore follows that university policies and practices need to consider international PhD students' agency, and encourage and facilitate research students to take ownership of their own learning and personal growth.

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[1] “foreign students” in this context means non-Chinese students.

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