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Abstract

The study described in this paper examined the national identity tension that often occurs between Chinese international students and Western host country members. Research questions guiding the study were: How does the experience of studying in New Zealand provide challenges for Chinese international identity, and how do Chinese students reflect their cognitions of national identity in everyday life. Case study was used as a method to collect data from 20 Chinese international students. Cross-national discussions of China from the participants' life experiences reveal a complex, sometimes contradictory, relationship between the individual and state, which is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and context, and provides a critical reflection on Chinese citizens. Drawing on interviews of Chinese students at a New Zealand university, this study showed that these Chinese international students are struggling with a changeable national identity which is relevant to their overseas experience, family history and education background.

Keywords

National Identity, Overseas Chinese Students, Case Study, Metaphor

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Kites Flying: Reflections of Chinese Students in New Zealand on National Identity

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The study described in this paper examined the national identity tension that often occurs between Chinese international students and Western host country members. Research questions guiding the study were: How does the experience of studying in New Zealand provide challenges for Chinese international identity, and how do Chinese students reflect their cognitions of national identity in everyday life. Case study was used as a method to collect data from 20 Chinese international students. Cross-national discussions of China from the participants' life experiences reveal a complex, sometimes contradictory, relationship between the individual and state, which is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and context, and provides a critical reflection on Chinese citizens. Drawing on interviews of Chinese students at a New Zealand university, this study showed that these Chinese international students are struggling with a changeable national identity which is relevant to their overseas experience, family history and education background. Keywords: National Identity, Overseas Chinese Students, Case Study, Metaphor

Introduction

From 1978 to the end of 2012, over 2.6 million Chinese studied outside their country, making China the world's top source of overseas students, according to the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange under the Ministry of Education (Xinhua, 2013). Chinese students choose to study in New Zealand because they believe it is a safe place to study (Middlebrook, 2001) and it is cheaper than other countries (e.g., UK, USA, Canada and Australia; Malcolm, Ling, & Sherry, 2004). Mainland Chinese have consistently been the largest group in New Zealand tertiary education's internationalisation (Wang, 2014), which is a significant New Zealand industry (Carter & Lurs, 2017). Understanding how students experience their study in New Zealand is therefore important for students, academics, institutions and Chinese Government officials. It would be a problem if Chinese educationalists do not know much more than the fact that Chinese students immerse themselves in their studies while living in a new environment and speaking in another language. In addition, this study of national identity is useful for evaluating the impact of overseas study on Asia students.

Prior research on Chinese students abroad has focused on how they adapt to the learning environments (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Thøgersen, 2012); namely, a consistent focus in the literature has been on culture difference. However, the department of Labour of New Zealand asserts that Chinese students have been in New Zealand for over fifty years now and yet New Zealanders still struggle to accept them as a significant part of the social fabric of New Zealand, let alone as the potential group of long-term migrants that they are now becoming (cited in Butcher, 2004). Moreover, Butcher (2004) claims that Chinese students in New Zealand should be taken as an important part of New Zealand's history and essential part of national conversation about New Zealand's identity rather than isolating their experiences from wider issues of national identity.

Identity, National Identity and Rationality

There seems to be something psychological about an “identity,” but theories of psychology are often unable to explain what this psychological element is (Billig, 1995, p. 61). That being so, an investigation of national identity may aim to disperse the concept of “identity” into a political element. Waterman (1999) argues that the extremity of “identity” politics in many parts of the globe has given rise to widespread use of the term “identity” as well as to a glamorous theoretical interest in the concept. An “identity” is not a thing; it is a short-hand description for ways of talking about the self and community (Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994). Ways of talking do not develop in social vacuums, but they are related to forms of life (Billig, 1995). Chinese overseas students’ experiences are not stimuli that evoke “identity” reactions; they belong to the forms of life which constitute what could be called national identities (Billig, 1995). From this vantage point, national identity involves both a cognitive awareness and an emotional attachment to a nation (Huddy, 2016). It would be important and urgent for Chinese government in an authoritarian state to understand Chinese international students’ reflections on national identity.

What national identity means in this study is more than an inner psychological state or an individual self-definition: it is a form of life, which is daily lived in the world of nation states (Billig, 1995, p. 69). In other words, national identity can be deployed and experienced in everyday life (Maxwell, 2016). A crucial question relating to national identity is how the national “we” is constructed and what is meant by such construction. Anderson (1991) argues that the nation is to be imagined as a unique entity in terms of time and space. As Billig (1995) points out, “a nation is more than an imagined community of people, for a place – a homeland — also has to be imagined” (p. 74). I would argue with Anderson and Billig’s view of imagining the nation in the following part that imagination of national identity should be combined with rationality.

Rationality is an important element of Western democratic philosophy which informed the classical sociologies of Weber, Durkheim, Parsons, and neo-Marxist critical theory (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Lukács & Lukács, 1971). Habermas claims that rationality is a concept “that is historically meaningful, that normatively meets the requirements of the social-welfare state, and that is theoretically clear and empirically identifiable” (1991, p. 244). Rawls’ definition of rationality focuses on justice, and Habermas’ advocacy of communication, are both based on “reasonable thinking” which tends towards anti-totalitarianism. It is, however, challenged by some political philosophers such as Chantal Mouffe (2000) who is critical of both Rawls and Habermas for their reliance on the idea that people will act in a rational, rule-bound way—whether those rules are “behaviour stipulations” or “moral imperatives.” Next, I will elucidate Habermas and Rawls’ view of rationality from three aspects and then I will point out that Billig’s (1995) view of imagining the nation without a certain rationality is fallible.

(1) Rationality brings stability. Rawls (2005) believed that citizens have the “capacity for a conception of the good and thus to be rational” (p. 16), whereas Habermas (1985) adopted a more naturalistic approach and stated that actors engage in familiar practices of communication, discourse and inquiry to achieve rational agreement.

(2) They have different views on how to build a rational framework. Rawls emphasized that two basic justice principles (liberal principle and social equity) are available through rational choice. While Habermas postulated rationality is a capacity inherent within language, especially in the form of argumentation. “We use the term argumentation for that type of speech in which participants thematize contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticize them through argumentation” (Habermas, 1984, p. 18). The structures of argumentative speech, which Habermas identified as the absence of coercive force, the mutual search for

understanding, and the compelling power of the better argument, form the key features from which inter-subjective rationality can make communication possible.

From above, we can see Habermas looked for a rule-bound system to ensure “ideal speech,” whereas Rawls seeks to free people to allow for their natural morality to come into play and he assumes democratic citizens share a mutual disinterest through the “veil of ignorance” in the “original position.” Habermas (1985) and Rawls (2005) were distinct from such as Thomas Hobbes (1998) and Adam Smith (2010) who assumed humanity is self-interested, aggressive and selfish. Rawls instead maintains, “persons act merely rationally as long as they are prudently guided by their conception of the good” (Rawls, 2005, p. 51).

(3) Apart from a reliance on rationality, it is to be recognized that people have a side of irrationality. Rawls referred to “the burden of reason” (Rawls, 2005, p. 51) and he accepted “a reasonable disagreement” under conditions of enduring pluralism. Habermas offered his own distinctive definition of rationality, one that is “epistemic, practical and inter-subjective.” For both of them, the rational potential builds into everyday speech. In this respect, “everyday speech” and “forms of life” constituting national identities have an element of rationality, not imagining in a vacuum.

This study examines national identity tension that often occurs between Chinese international students and Western host country members including a cross-national discussion of China. An assumption of this researcher is that the experience of studying abroad may cause Chinese students to more strongly identify with their home country—China—and feel uncomfortable hearing host country members criticize any aspect of China (Hail, 2015). The purpose of this article is to see the light about the complexity relationship between overseas Chinese students and their national identity, and to make sense of how the rational reflections of overseas students in New Zealand influence the imagination of national identity.

The outline of this article is as follows. First is a description of the methodology, which was a qualitative case study of Chinese overseas students’ reflections on their national identity. This is followed by a presentation of the findings related to students’ reflections. Last, this researcher considers the tendency and implications of the Chinese international students’ national identity in future.

Methodology

The study here is part of a doctoral study that is exploring citizenship of Chinese international students who are studying in New Zealand. Qualitative methods were selected for this research, in keeping with my aim to gain more nuanced, inclusive and detailed perspectives on Chinese international overseas students’ national identity. Qualitative research has been described as naturalistic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This means that researchers adopt strategies that parallel how people act in the course of daily life, typically interacting with informants in a natural and unobtrusive manner (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). This can be developed by case studies.

First, case studies are a common way to do qualitative inquiry. Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner (1984) argue that because a case study cannot provide reliable information about the broader class, it is only useful in the preliminary stages of an investigation since it provides a hypothesis, which may be tested systematically with a larger number of cases (p. 34). However, it is misleading to see the case study as a pilot method to be used only in preparing the study’s larger surveys, because as Flyvbjerg (2006) points out, this ignores the fact that the case study produces the type of context-dependent knowledge and the possibility of epistemic theoretical construction (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

The new evaluation movement, led by Stake (1994) in the US and MacDonald (1975) in the UK, aimed to describe the particularities of the case and its context of implementation in

such detail that readers could *understand* the material and social processes involved (Kite, 1998). This understanding corresponds with the intention that qualitative methodology studies people in order to know them personally and experience what they experience in their daily struggles in society; the qualitative researcher looks at settings and people holistically (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015). Using a case as what Stake (1978) terms a site allows the researcher to discover the meaning or lived experience of the investigated topic and to address the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2012). It is study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances.

Second, case study research is not sampling research, that is, a process of selecting units from a population of interest (e.g., people, organization). The first obligation for the researcher is to understand this one case (Stake, 1995) whether we study it analytically or holistically, culturally, entirely, or by mixed methods—but we concentrate, at least for the time being, on the case (Stake, 2005). This research draws attention to the question of what specially can be learned about the case of Chinese overseas students' national identity in the New Zealand context. Further research needs to be developed on the limitations of case studies which are a way of portraying a single instance locked in time and circumstance (MacDonald & Walker, 1975) and are essentially conservative in that it captures an instant in time and space. It tells “a” truth but not “the” truth (Walker, 1983).

Participant Selection

The participants in this study are Chinese students in New Zealand universities. Due to issues related to feasibility, a purposive sampling approach was adapted. In particular, this study focuses on Chinese students from Mainland China, excluding Hong Kong students on the grounds that Hong Kong's education system is different from Mainland China's system (Fairbrother, 2003). One important criterion for selecting university students is that they have a background of higher education from China, so they may have a reasonable understanding of the educational contradiction in the new context. Overall, the criteria for selection of the participants included:

- Over 18-years-old and enrolled as a student at a New Zealand university
- Born and raised in, and attended secondary or high school in Mainland China

Recruitment started after ethics approval was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Potential participants were made aware participation was entirely voluntary. No incentive of monetary value was given at any stage of data collection. However, I as the researcher provided non-alcoholic beverages and snacks for interviews and focus groups. The final recruitment flyer is bi-lingual (Chinese and English). Posters were put up on notice boards in various departments, as well as students' health centres, across the University of Auckland and Auckland University of Technology. Research information was also posted on the webpages of a number of student associations or clubs with a large number of Chinese member across various tertiary institutions.

Ethical Considerations

Information collected during the research cannot be confidential throughout, however, as it will eventually or be published. At this stage, I made every effort to ensure that the information the participants provided are used only in such a way as does not identify a particular individual as its source. Anonymity was enhanced by using pseudonyms.

Participants were instructed to not discuss the research conversations with anyone other than those present and the researcher's supervisors. These conversations were held in a classroom or other suitable private location so that it was not possible for others to overhear the discussion. Participants were reminded of their responsibility to respect the views of all present.

The language used to collect the data was Mandarin. I felt that if the participants spoke in their own language rather than in their second language, they would feel more at ease in expressing their thoughts and ideas clearly. For the purpose of research, all the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and translated into English by me. In order to avoid changing or missing the meaning of the original data during the process of translating from Mandarin to English, the translated data was checked by a Chinese colleague.

Data Collection

A combination of data collection methods—20 individual interviews and 2 focus groups—were applied to investigate how overseas experience shapes Chinese students' thinking of national identity. Subjective views were gathered through interviews and then discussed in focus groups.

Interview

In social research settings, the interview as a qualitative method acquires knowledge through a co-relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer. Lapenta (2004) describes an interview as a social encounter that explores knowledge in a contextual, inter-relational and linguistic form that fills the social identity gap between interviewer and interviewee. From this perspective, the fundamental goal of the interview is to attempt understanding of the "epistemological identities" of the interviewee and the interviewer, from an interviewee who possesses this knowledge (albeit maybe intuitively) to an interviewer who is interested in that knowledge (Brenner, 1985). I would argue with Brenner that the goal of interview is not to pass one person's knowledge to another one, but it is about co-generating information for interviewer and interviewee (Kushner, 2000). Also in my focus group, the participants were learning from each other and generating a different, social kind of knowledge (Wilkinson, 1998). Further, an interview is more than a strategy for asking questions—it should be seen as personalized instrument, an expression of how the interviewee sees the world—how and why an interviewer values people (Kushner, 2000, p. 83).

Here, the interview is no longer regarded as a stand-alone instrument, but is part of the logic of enquiry (Kushner, 2017). The time of interview was from 20 minutes to 2 hours which depended on the interviewee. Interview questions opened with "Could you tell me what was your life like in China?" or "What do you think of your experience in New Zealand?"

Café-style Focus Groups

In this study, 45-minute café-style semi-structured focus groups were utilized in order to trigger memories, thoughts, and ideas among the participants (Lichtman, 2012). My aim was to share some of the ideas and perceptions arising from the individual interviews and to generate second-order data. The second reason for choosing to use the café-style focus group with Chinese students was the consideration that those participants may be shy and unwilling to share their experiences for political and Chinese-cultural reasons. Therefore, I imitated Wood's (2011) café-style approach with Chinese students to create a safe space to explore their

ideas. It enabled the students who have had similar study-overseas experiences to exchange their opinions, to adapt, to omit, or to insert responses to research questions.

I conducted two focus groups after the interviews. Both focus groups had five international students. In one group, students were invited from the 20 interviewed participants to further discuss the interview data. In the other group, students were completely new to the study. The aim of the two focus groups was to triangulate the interview data, to ensure the validity of their communication, and to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation.

Data Analysis: Metaphors

Personal narratives in interviews and focus groups help to explain the everyday experience but do not equate to incorporating the explanation of one's position in the more complicated world view of national identity. As I reviewed the students' stories of experiences, I employed inductive analysis, taking note of excerpts of data that described the experience of participants or reflected the meaning they find in their experience. As Smith (1978) notes, "Usually the perceptual reaction is accompanied by a feeling of "Why didn't I see that or think about it before?" I don't understand the dynamics of the reaction, but it happens. It seems functional (p. 330). I looked for implicit theories from the interview data. According to Hunt (1992), "Implicit theories are the underlying beliefs we hold about the nature of human affairs, and...they guide our actions in many areas" (p. 14). The idea of using a metaphor to help capture and express the implicit theories in Chinese international students' personal experience appealed to me, since the students themselves used metaphors as they spoke.

I asked myself if adopting the use of metaphor will enhance and further understanding the complexities conception of national identity from the Chinese international students' various experiences. I agree with Lakoff and Johnson (2008) that "such metaphors are capable of giving us a new understanding of our experiences. Thus, they can give new meaning to our past, to our daily activity, and to what we know and believe" (p. 139). Lakoff and Johnson may see the metaphor from the view of its function. While Morgan (2001) argues that using metaphors is a first step in theorizing, both a theory and a metaphor are defined most easily as simplifications of a complex world. Morgan shows how metaphors help us to think about complexity in terms that make it manageable. Metaphor is a linguistic device to explore complexity. So, in this study, I attempted to use metaphor and its entailments to explicate the implicit theories in Chinese students' reflection on national identity.

A metaphor that emerged from the data and lingered for some time in my mind is "kites flying." Kites have the potential to fly and many of them do fly outside of China. The students become flying kites who can fly high and see widely when they can enjoy the freedom and democracy in overseas settings.

Results

The data show that the Chinese students who participated in this study are like kites flying outside of China - the thread still held in the hand of China. The thread is hard to define and it depends on different people's life experience. It may refer to the CCP (China Community Party), family and culture, and so forth. The three modes of kites discussed below were developed to capture the central concepts that emerged from the largely descriptive data.

Honour-Based Kites

Half of the participants reported that they sometimes feel uncomfortable with the way Western society talks about China. In contrast, they appeared to more strongly identify with China and look at China in a more positive light (Hail, 2015).

I dare to say that no nation could compare with the Chinese nation in the future and the Chinese nation will stand in the top of all nations. Kissinger who once wrote a book about China around 1970s, predicts that China would be the best country in the world. China is making progress now, and is better than in the Culture Revolution times when there was no freedom and self-sense, at least now I have freedom out of that country and I know what kind of life I need. Therefore, everything is changing and will be better than before. Some people are saying the CCP is going to be overturned by people, but I say that it would not happen at all. (Qi, a doctoral student of Engineer)

Using a firm tone, “China would be the best country in the world,” he said it in unreasoning confidence without any criteria. It seems that Qi lives in an imaginary nation under the leader of CCP—“the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provide explanations for its existence” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Thus, some Chinese participants, like Qi, may not question or compare alternatives—different voices from the CCP—because the social patterns from their traditional culture may reproduce themselves without active intervention when practices and structures are taken for granted. As another respondent’s view:

When President Xi visited New Zealand, I was very excited and had a strong feeling of belonging to China as I could see the leader of our motherland visited my overseas studying country in my limited studying years, which is a really precious chance. (Ming, Science)

Motherland shows the Chinese students endow the country with life and emotion. Outside of China, it seems they are far away from “home”—motherland. “Belonging” is a word revealing a strong emotion of this respondent towards China and showing his national identity with proud and honour. This might not only result from his imagination of China as motherland but also from many elements of formal structure and culture are highly institutionalized and functional for the Chinese students and constitute an authoritative rationality of the country. For example,

My relationship with China is affiliation. From outside, I can accept different thoughts no matter from West or East. But inside, I belong to China that is my motherland, having my family and hometown where I was born and raised. My body is Chinese blood and Chinese genes. I am a Chinese, including my thinking, my heart, and my behaviours all have Chinese background! (Liu, engineer)

In Chinese culture, “Chinese blood and Chinese genes” evokes feelings of ethnic pride. Chinese people usually refer to them as “Descendants of the Yellow Emperor” or “Heirs of the Dragon.” Yellow Emperor refers to the culture of the Central Plains and that emanates from the banks of the Yellow River in northern China (Giordano, 2004). Both terms impart the idea of a single origin of Chinese civilization that Chinese people have a common ancestry and a same root. Song, another participant says, “I felt my ‘root’ is in my hometown. I had never,

ever left Tianjin before coming to New Zealand. Here, always I felt I am a guest in a new territory” (Song, Science).

She grew up in a warm family in China. Her parents always took care of her and her friends always accompanied her. She is also a traditional Chinese girl with a deep concern for the Chinese culture.

Chinese culture is broad and profound. But I hate that some Chinese people forget their “roots.” For example, Xenophile! I prefer our harmonious culture. We Chinese people are not attributing an aggressive stance. Being implicit and conservative as Chinese people are our thousands year culture. Why would you discard your ancestor’s culture while worshipping foreigner’s stuff? This something I really don’t understand! Those Chinese who are worshipping foreigner’s culture in my eyes are inferior. For example, the Chinese media usually report news about foreign culture and the like, I don’t think it’s necessary. (Song, science)

The notion of “root” resides at Chinese culture indicating the same authoritative figure, the Yellow Emperor and the same region, the Central Plains. Song’s animosity towards some Chinese people who worship foreign cultures rather than Chinese traditional culture reveals a strong sense of Chinese nationality as a Chinese citizen, as well as Ting says:

I am very proud of that land, culture, background where I am from. I am very proud. I cried when I saw the national flag and listened to the national song during the Olympics, yet I will never cry for NZ even though I like it here. I would choose to go back to China if NZ and China had the same environmental conditions. (Ting, social work)

Criticism-Based Kites

In contrast to the young Chinese students described in the previous section who shared vehement, excited, and impassioned speeches about how much they love China, two other students criticised China—a story always has another side of it.

In my heart, the concept of country, China, does not exist. We don’t have the concept of people, where does the concept of country come from? A Country should take care of everyone’s interests. However, the CCP claims they represent the basic interests of majority of people. In other words, they are calling on all of our ordinary people to work hard for that majority of people. In New Zealand, people could protest government on the street if they are not satisfied. Even they may not make some kind of difference in reality; at least they could vent their anger through protest. (Cello, Psychology)

His statement seems to imply that China doesn’t have citizens, which he said in a short and straight way at the beginning of the interview. He cares about the Chinese people rather than the abstract of institution of the country comparing with the New Zealand’s government. Another interviewee, Lu has a similar response as Cello. I think it is necessary to present the whole story of Lu to make sense the reasons of criticising of China.

Honestly, China is a country that made me afraid.

My grand grandfather was a translator for the Japanese. My grandparents were landlords before the Land Reform (a historical event). They were good landlords and they distributed money and food to land labours who were sick. However, those land labours suddenly betrayed them, looting their home at the time of Land Reform. Facing the looted home with chilling heart, my grandfather and grandmother were forced to be beggars on the street for a while. Until now, they sometimes would be grumpy saying: "What was wrong that our identity is landlord?" Having that bitter experience seemed not enough for this shaking family. Subsequently, the family ushered in another history tide-Culture Revolution. "My grandfather on my father side was Kuomintang, a solider of whampo Military Academy, where Chiang was the chancellor. Just because of my grandfather's background had relationship with Kuomintang, my father had been to be a victim of the Culture Revolution. So, he reaped the fruits of the family shame, dodging the nasty stigma of being a "Kuomintang's brat."

Other children could sit in the class, my father only stood up in class. At that standing moment in the class, my father secretly determined that "I must carefully study at school and never came back here once I grow up." My father climbed out the school window on Saturday and studied by himself in an empty classroom. In addition, my grandmother made a huge sacrifice by doing heavy manual work for my mom in case she was deported to rural area from Beijing. My grandmother applied to dig coal pipes in the suburb of Beijing. It was unbelievable that her thick cotton-padded jacket could be soaked to the skin in the bitter cold winter.

Even suffering those unfair experiences, my grandparents still love the Party. Now, they must see Xinwen Lianbo, China central Television's daily news broadcast every day of their whole lives. Especially my grandfather, he subscribed the reference news, published by Xinhua News Agency. He reads and takes notes on it every day. I don't know why they had no personal animosity towards the Party." (Lu, Education)

Her family changed with the Chinese social change. It seems the people who participated in the Culture Revolution might find those experiences etched indelibly and profoundly in their minds, even in their next generation's memories. Kushner (2000) has pointed out that it is important "to invert the relationship between people and projects and to use people's views and lives as the lens through which to perceive and help measure (p.102)." There is not any doubt that the relationship between Lu's family and state has a great influence on Lu's critical view of the country. Secondly, from Lu and Cello's view, we can see that their family life changes are the most important influences on their comments on the country, which means Lu and Cello, unlike Qi, who had a new perception of the situation to act in already existing society. What Lu and Cello's family experienced formed a rationality of the country that is not as the CCP declared in the existing society that the government serves the people but the government is not respectful of the people.

Recluse-Based Kites

Some other Chinese overseas students, neither honour the country with passion nor criticise from personal experience, however, they choose to avoid talking about it in New Zealand.

Last time, I had a conversation with my supervisor and an Iranian colleague. We talked about the issues regarding examination cheating in China. First, I told them this problem should not be blamed on the country of China because the country would not be a control factor if you were to do a statistical analysis. I cannot say it is possible to view a country directly and see the effect of how many people cheated on an examination. But I may say the country as a factor might have an influence on another factor, and then the other factor might influence the other factor... So finally, I said having a conversation on "politics and religion" is not fruitful, because to be honest, really the discussion does not have a lot of meaning. (Shan, Business)

He has a reasonable and strongly-worded thinking of why it is unworthy to blame a country from some issues.

My personal attitude towards the topic of politics and religion is that I refuse to talk about these topics with friends. First, a conversation between friends should be relaxed so we can talk about our studies or life. Why must we talk about formal and heavy topic in terms of religion or politics? Second, because I am a student, I don't have the social experience to judge other countries and their politics and religions and so forth. My comments are more or less related to my personal journey, and would always be biased if I did not have too many social experiences.

Shandong and the criticism-based interviewees above are from different parts of China and even have a different historical background. Some other students might believe that some part of history in China is far away from themselves and it has no meaning to talk about it and may think the same way as Shandong and Liu:

In addition, I do not pursue much on politics. It is not necessary to talk about it because it is far away from my daily life. I am not interested in it because it does not have any relations with my life. Today's China is not the old times China. You, as a researcher may do some research on it, but do the results fit in today's China society? Does the result play an important role in modern China? China has changed a lot. The Culture Revolution is a tragedy in China but I would not like to read books about it on the grounds that their stories are too specific and too individual and too far away from me! (Liu, science)

Liu, as one of the young generation in China, would like to look forward to the future, rather than to talk about the past history of China, which seems meaningless to him.

An author of a book who wrote his experienced in the Culture Revolution might be a victim, and what he wrote may change my view of the world and may have a negative influence on me if I read that kind of book. It was just their experiences. Each one in the world has their own experience which is totally different with each other. In old times, I did not experience the culture revolution so I cannot relate to their words. If I have empathy for their writing, that empathy feeling was added on me by the author. Instead, I may read an autobiography of a famous author because he would not have any emotion

released in the writing, which belongs to literature, having neither right nor wrong values inside and not relating to political. (Liu, Physical)

It is helpful to consider what are the right or wrong values to a generation of Chinese. The criteria to judge is not from the political education, curriculum, and history, but from their own experience. They may believe it as long as they experienced it, otherwise they think it is another's story and it cannot say anything.

You have no right to judge something if you never experienced it, just the same as you cannot say how beautiful New Zealand is if you never came to New Zealand. Many people talked about Hong Kong. I asked them have you ever been to Hong Kong? They answered "no." I told them that if you never been there how you can comment on the things that have happened in Hong Kong? What you see is other's experiences from the internet but you cannot be sure that their experience is right as you cannot be sure what I am telling is true in this interview. (Shan, Business)

Shan's view may explain why some Chinese students avoid talking and discussing China in New Zealand. They are neither standing with the side of China nor criticising it but have their own belief system that is their own experience. While another kind of recluse-based kites are those that escape from the reality of China. This starts from a simple question by asking Xiao: "How was your life in China and New Zealand?"

In China, I am interested in Chinese traditional culture, especially the landscape painting, traditional poems, and calligraphy. In the four years at New Zealand, I never touch them again. I thought of that question before and realized that it is a conscious seclusion and a mentality of social compensation as I cannot participate myself into Chinese social society then I chose to elude the reality and to enjoy myself in the arts world. (Xiao, Arts)

Interviewer: *Were you escaping reality in China?*

I thought the paintings are beautiful. But now if let me rethink of it, yes, I had a little bit of escaping.

Interviewer: *Why did you chose to escape?*

Something in real life that I did not really realize and that contrasted with my dreams. Some social problems until I experienced then I realized that I cannot change them. For example, I was interested in agricultural problems as a freshmen student as other young people have dreams at young ages. I came from countryside, so my dream was to solve issues of agriculture, gradually, that was lost in reality and was gridded off in life. If we talk about micro-politics in life, meaning politics of people, it is very tiny and trivial, grinding off your passion bit by bit. Since then, I slowly moved far away from my dream of agricultural issues and then I turned to reading Jinyoung's novels for a term. Anyway, at that time I had to find other interests to compensate for what I had lost in real life.

Xiao escaped from the reality of life in China and was helpless in changing the society. He might represent a group of people who are in China, to be a winner in spirit. In other words, they are hiding themselves in a spirit shell to escape from reality, which provides a piece of picture of being a Chinese citizen. We cannot deny the fact that the social environment constructing around them that constrains their ability to change further and they are afraid to change the reality because the change might threat their sense of security, increase the cost of information processing and disrupt routines.

Discussion

The data revealed a complicated picture of Chinese international students who participated in this study feeling towards China: some were feeling uncomfortable, angry, or annoyed when they are discussing some negative aspect of China with local New Zealand people; some were choosing not to mention or talk about it; some were criticising China according to their family experience in China and some were escaping. As indicated in the literature review, honour based kites still live in an imagination of the country and have constructed a rationalized “root” culture. The power of “root” culture is deeply rooted in the vitality and cohesion of a nation, by which people and social organizations produce and reproduce their material subsistence and “root” organize time and space from one generation to next (Lan, 2010). The rationality of honour based kites would bring stability for the society as they support the country, government and CCP leaders.

However, for the critical based kites, they saw the discrepancy between the ideology of communist in book and the disappointing behaviour of CCP members in reality. Also, those who choose to study in a democratic culture would be facing a change from their previous experience under the Communist Party culture. As Carlson and Widnaman (1988) revealed, students who had previously lived abroad showed a significantly smaller change in and a more positive and critical attitude towards, political concern, cross-cultural interest and cultural cosmopolitanism compared with those who had not previously lived abroad. In future, critical-based kites and recluse-based would be a challenge for an authoritarian country of China.

Chinese overseas students could be able to reproduce and redefine Chinese society they have left, through the process of sociological interaction in New Zealand. And they may be able to act independently to make their own free choices in New Zealand consisting of a Western culture patterned arrangement in a way of gaining meaning and scientific understanding of the society as conscious agents in a key dimension of a studying abroad environment (Thorpe & Jacobson, 2013).

In general, this research found that the Chinese overseas students in this study are struggling to find their national identity with limited rationality. The rationality may refer to the Chinese traditional culture, their experience in New Zealand, and their family history. As Bourdieu’s words suggest, “People are motivated, driven by, torn from a state of in-difference and moved by the stimuli sent by certain fields, and not others” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 26). This study made a major breakthrough in the literature review of the imaginational national identity that should be limited to a certain rationality.

Furthermore, Chinese international students’ national identity is a less explored area in literature review – it is whether and how Chinese students in New Zealand are being socialized in a way that makes them reflect critically on their home country (i.e., socialized into more independent thinking). The methodology is an important aspect of addressing this question. The data include more than one source, having not only objective but also personal meanings, which allow us access to all the complexity of subjective and inter-subjective experience. We have seen how the mix of individual interview and group discussion allows for some movement between subjective and inter-subjective views.

However, this case is limited by the time and location. Firstly, maybe the thinking of participation I chose who were born in the 1980s is different from the students who were born in the 1960s on the grounds that their history background is completely different. Stenhouse called case study, “contemporary history” (1977). He saw each case study as part of a developing aggregate of historical insights, linked to its past and pointing to a future. Secondly, this case was investigated in a democratic New Zealand. It would be another scenario if the case were conducted in other countries.

To limit the limitations of time and location in this case study, I assessed that data saturation. “An adequate sample size in qualitative research is one that permits – by virtue of not being too large – the deep, case-oriented analysis that is a hallmark of all qualitative inquiry” (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 183). The signals of saturation seem to evaluate the adequacy and the comprehensiveness of the results. Relate to this study, through in depth individual interviews, and subsequent fieldwork observations, verified by two focus groups, I realized no significant new data on the participants’ views on national identity was emerging.

The findings contribute to Chinese students’ social interactions in overseas context bearing on the larger body of research on Chinese heritage while most research emphasising their academic performance. In fact, crossing from a communist society to a democratic one causes a huge shake-up of identity for the Chinese international students. It is essentially an axiological shift: foundational values are destabilised and questioned. This often-discomforting process of reassessment is not well understood by Western academics who teach and supervise Chinese students (Guan & Jones, 2011). In light of globalization, the study plays a role as a trailblazer for future research on Chinese learners to consider the impact of study overseas factors in the research.

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