

Chapter 2

Encountering ‘the West’ Through Academic Mobility: Shifting Representations and Reinforced Stereotypes

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Abstract The number of students from the East who are participating in some form of education abroad has increased sharply in recent decades, with the majority studying in the West. Drawing on a large-scale study of international exchange students from a Hong Kong university, this chapter focuses on the perceptions and experiences of a Mainland Chinese participant who sojourned in the United States. Discussion largely centres on ‘Gao Lin’s’ attitudes towards ‘Others’ (e.g. ‘Westerners’) and his positioning in the host country. While some participants in the main study developed meaningful intercultural relationships, a sense of belonging in the new environment, and a more ‘global self’, Gao Lin returned home with reinforced stereotypes of host nationals (‘Westerners’), a strengthened national identity and little desire for further intercultural interactions. Internal dimensions (e.g. limited intercultural awareness and understanding, negative perceptions of the ‘Other’, stereotyping), and a complex mix of external factors (e.g. weak host receptivity, a power imbalance between first and second language speakers) impacted the way his sojourn unfolded. His case study underscores the negative consequences of Otherisation, prejudice and unrealistic expectations (e.g. idealised representations) and points to the need for research-based interventions (e.g. intercultural communication courses) to help optimise education abroad learning.

Keywords Education abroad • Identity • Intercultural relations • Othering • Stereotyping

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Nearly everything I know about the USA is from the Internet. I also sometimes watch American soap operas... My impression is that it's a very democratic and liberal country with advanced academic research... I don't have any prejudices against the local people. My impression of Americans is quite good... What I'm looking forward to the most is to see the true America and to make some friends with locals. (Pre-sojourn interview, Gao Lin)

I hung out mostly with Chinese people [while in the USA]... The time that I spent with foreigners was little... Western countries are quite similar to my expectations; however, I don't like the culture of Arabs, South Americans, and Mexicans. I especially don't like Arab culture. (Post-sojourn interview, Gao Lin)

2.1 Introduction

The comments above were extracted from interviews with a Mainland Chinese university student before and after a semester-long exchange programme in the USA. While higher education administrators and educators may hope that international education will lead to significant learning (e.g. academic, personal, linguistic, intercultural) (Vande Berg et al. 2012), this is not always the case; a myriad of internal and external factors impact the quality of stays abroad (Jackson 2012; Kinginger 2009). While some sojourners significantly enhance their intercultural competence¹ and second language proficiency by cultivating close relationships with people who have a different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, others may have little contact with host nationals or experience negative encounters, and then return home with reinforced stereotypes. Sojourns are highly idiosyncratic (Coleman 2013; Jackson 2012; Williams and Johnson 2011).

The number of Asian students who are participating in some form of education abroad has increased sharply, with the majority spending their sojourns in Western countries. According to the 2013 Open Doors Report,² for example, students from China, India and South Korea now represent 49 % of the total number of international students in the USA, and the number of undergraduates from Mainland China increased to nearly 236,000 (International Institute of Education 2013). To better understand the impact of academic mobility, I conducted a multi-method study which tracked the language and intercultural learning of 105 Chinese students from a Hong Kong university who joined a semester-long international exchange programme. Most sojourned in a Western country, with the USA, the

¹There are many definitions of intercultural competence. Drawing on the conceptions of intercultural communication specialists, Deardorff (2004: 19) formulated the following broad definition: 'the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes'.

²Funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, Open Doors® is an online resource that provides statistics on international students and scholars in the U.S.

most popular destination (Jackson 2013, 2015). As part of this study, 22 Chinese students were interviewed in-depth before and after their sojourn.

This chapter centres on the experiences and perceptions of Gao Lin (a pseudonym), a Mainland Chinese interviewee who spent a semester in the USA. His story has both unique and similar elements to those of his fellow sojourners, who also experienced life in a Western country for the first time. His journey brings into focus the effect agency, identity, attitudes and positioning can have on the way sojourns unfold. Gao Lin's case raises our awareness of the negative consequences of otherisation and essentialism, and suggests the need for intervention (e.g. pre-sojourn intercultural communication courses) to help students optimise stays abroad.

2.2 Identity and Social Categorisation: Otherisation and Occidentalism

While identity can furnish us with group membership and a sense of belonging, it can also serve as the basis for negative perceptions and reactions to people who differ from us and our perceived group(s) (Block 2007; Jackson 2014). The similarity-attraction hypothesis posits that human beings are naturally drawn to people who share a similar language and ways of being, and individuals may unconsciously or consciously shy away from those who do not belong to their in-group (Adler et al. 2013; Byrne 1969). Rigid social categorisation (e.g. stereotyping, Otherisation) and ethnocentrism,³ the roots of identity biases, can create barriers to successful, equitable intercultural interactions and hinder intercultural/second language learning (Dervin 2012; Holliday 2012; Jackson 2014).

Social categorisation refers to the way individuals group people into conceptual categories in order to make sense of our complex world. Simply put, people are placed into groups and categories according to current understandings, perceptions and experience (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). This can easily lead to stereotypes and Otherisation. Stereotyping entails "the automatic application of information we have about a country or culture group, both positive and negative, to every individual in it" (Paige et al. 2006, p. 57). Closely related to this phenomenon is otherisation or othering, a form of social representation which involves "the objectification of another person or group" (Abdallah-Pretceille 2003). In this process, culture is used to account for all of the views and behaviours of "the Other" (e.g. Asians, 'Westerners'), largely ignoring the complexity and diversity of individual acts and attributes (e.g. emotions, ideas, behaviours) (Dervin 2012; Holliday 2011, 2012). Instead of seeing people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds as individuals, in the eyes of an ethnocentric person, they are

³Ethnocentrism is defined by Berry et al. (2011) as '[a] point of view that accepts one's group's standards as the best, and judges all other groups in relation to theirs' (p. 469).

merely representatives of a particular cultural or national group, and tied to a fixed set of characteristics and behaviours. Thus, essentialism entails the act of reductionism, whereby diversity within groups is ignored in favour of a simpler, unitary representation (Abdallah-Pretceille 2003; Holliday 2012).

Since the publication of Said's seminal work in 1978 (Said 1978), much has been written about the negative consequences of orientalism, neo-orientalism and the stereotyping of people from 'the East' (e.g. Asians) (e.g. Dervin 2012; Dervin and Gao 2012; Holliday 2012); this is giving rise to advances in critical postcolonial studies and intercultural education. While other chapters in this volume critique new and old forms of Orientalism, this chapter is largely concerned with otherisation and occidentalism, that is, 'the construction of the West' (e.g. Europe and English-speaking countries) and 'images of Westerners' from the perspective of 'non-Westerners' (Buruma and Margalit 2004; Carrier 1995).

Occidentalism encompasses ideologies or visions of 'the West' developed in either the West or non-west, and includes political attitudes and dehumanised, stereotyped depictions (Han et al. 2013; Rehman 2013). Outside the Western world, images of 'the West' are largely derived from various forms of mass communication (e.g. television, radio, newspapers, the Internet), via entertainment programmes (e.g. American TV sitcoms and soap operas), documentaries, movies and news reports (local and international), as well as government propaganda and published historical accounts (e.g. school textbooks written from particular viewpoints). Pictures of 'the West' that have been constructed in Asia (and elsewhere) may be altered or reinforced through direct personal experience, such as education abroad, the subject of this chapter.

2.3 Background to the Study

In the present study, all 105 participants were ethnic Chinese university students from various faculties who were raised in either Hong Kong or Mainland China. Prior to their semester abroad, they completed an application essay and survey which gathered demographic information and details about their impending sojourn (e.g. their expectations, concerns, goals). Twenty-two interviewees provided further insight into their aims/perceptions (e.g. views of the host environment/people). Post-sojourn, the participants completed a questionnaire survey, which gathered information about their sojourn learning and perceptions; the interviewees were re-interviewed to gain more insight into their sojourn experiences and positioning (Jackson 2013). The pre- and post-surveys were analysed with SPSS; with the help of NVivo, a software programme, the results were triangulated with the qualitative data, which had been thematically coded (Bazeley and Jackson 2013; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

The oral and written narratives generated in this study provide a rich source of data about the participants' motivations, expectations, experiences, struggles, gains and shifting identities in various contexts. Adopting a narrative approach

(Polkinghorne 1995), I have explored their experiences of studying abroad, the meanings they attach to them, and the impact on their identities.

2.3.1 A Focal Case Study: Emic and Etic Perspectives

Instead of briefly summarising the experiences of the 22 interviewees, this chapter centres on Gao Lin's story, to permit a more in-depth look at a sojourner's evolving perceptions of Self and Other in context. Prior to travelling to the USA, he participated in an interview that lasted 93 min, while his post-sojourn interview was 173 min. Both were conducted in Putonghua (Mandarin) by a bilingual (Chinese-English) research assistant (RA). Data excerpts were translated into English and checked by another bilingual RA, and this version was then reviewed by Gao Lin for accuracy.

In keeping with the theme of this volume, this case study was guided by the following questions: What are Gao Lin's perceptions of and attitudes towards Western nations and 'Westerners' (e.g. Americans) before and after his sojourn in the USA? How have his cultural/linguistic attitudes/experiences in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and the USA impacted his self-identities? Both emic (insider) and etic (researcher) perspectives are woven into the recounting of his story.

2.3.2 Gao Lin's Profile

When Gao Lin joined this study, he was a 20-year old student in the Faculty of Science, majoring in risk management science, a specialisation which incorporates knowledge from mathematics, statistics, actuarial science, finance, computing and engineering. Academically, he was very successful and had a cumulative Grade Point Average of 3.6 out of 4 when he applied to join an international exchange programme organised by his Hong Kong University.

He had received all of his primary and secondary schooling in a large city in Mainland China and had never travelled further than Hong Kong. His parents, both college graduates, had not studied abroad and spoke little English. Gao Lin's first language was Putonghua and, by the time this study got underway, he stated that he had become fairly fluent in Cantonese, the Chinese dialect that is most prevalent in Hong Kong. Gao Lin had studied English for 6 years prior to beginning his university studies. Before venturing abroad, he rated his overall proficiency in English as "good", using the following five-point scale: excellent, very good, good, fair and poor, and gave a similar rating for his listening, reading and writing skills. Less confident in his oral proficiency, he perceived it to be only "fair". He had recently received a score of 104 on the TOEFL (IELTS band 7.5), which indicated that he had a more than satisfactory command of academic English. Even so, in his first interview, he remarked: "My English proficiency is not high enough",

and stressed his desire to enhance his overall proficiency, adding: “English is very useful and I like to learn it. I’ll feel accomplished when I speak it well”.

2.4 Pre-sojourn (USA) Expectations and Perceptions

In his first interview, Gao Lin outlined his aspirations for his semester-long sojourn in North Carolina:

I joined this exchange programme mainly to see what it’s like in the Western world and to get to know more about their lifestyle and ways of dealing with things. I also want to get knowledge of the most advanced research in the field. The most important factor is to broaden my mind and know about Western society... I hope to know more about American culture and Americans’ ways of dealing with things so as to build a basis for my postgraduate studies in the future.

In this interview, he was asked the following question: “What do you think you will gain abroad that you would not be able to accomplish if you remained in Hong Kong for all of your university studies?” Without hesitation, he responded: “It’ll help me get in touch with the real Western society, as personal experience will be more authentic and impressive. The better English-speaking environment can also help me to practice my English”. Similar to the other interviewees who had never visited or lived in the USA, he largely relied on the mass media for information. He had limited knowledge of the country and was keen to discover more:

I don’t know much about the university or the city, and my knowledge of the USA is not as much as that of the students who’ve already travelled there. I’ve searched for information about the university on the Internet. I didn’t search much about the country. Nearly everything I know about the USA is from the Internet. I also sometimes watch American soap operas to practice my listening in English but I haven’t taken any courses about America or its culture. My impression is that it’s a very democratic and liberal country with advanced academic research... I don’t have any prejudices against the local people. My impression of Americans is quite good... These images mostly come from talking with friends. I don’t have deep knowledge of American culture...

At this point, a few months prior to departure, Gao Lin appeared to have a very positive image of the host country and host nationals, although he had concerns about safety due to “local news reports about violence in the USA”. Acknowledging that he lacked a “deep understanding” of the host environment, he wished to change this: “During my semester abroad, I hope to deepen my understanding of American culture by joining local students’ activities, having discussions with local friends, and by traveling around the country”. (Interview #1) Similar to all of his peers who were U.S.-bound, he aspired to make meaningful connections with locals.

Worried that his ‘poor’ oral English skills would be insufficient in an English-speaking environment, Gao Lin resolved to enhance his proficiency and learn more about American culture by interacting with Americans and other international students while abroad:

Through the semester abroad, I hope to overcome some of my weaknesses. For example, I'm not very confident. My communication ability is not strong and my oral English is poor. By becoming friends with local students and joining their activities, I hope to improve my English. Then, I can have a better extracurricular life and also get to know more about the local culture. I think I'll spend most of my time with local and international students during my stay in America. More participation in local friends' activities can help me communicate with the locals. I'm also thinking about visiting New York and Boston to widen my vision and see more of America's scenery, cultures, and customs.

Although he now knew that he would study in the USA, he made no effort to interact with American students (or other international students) on campus and spent the majority of his free time with other Mainland Chinese students.

When asked about his attitude towards cultural diversity, there seemed to be a mismatch between his agentic choices and his idealised self. At first, he remarked: "I think I'm comparatively open. I'm tolerant and inclusive and free in thinking. I don't like to jump to any judgment of other cultures according to my own way of thinking". Later in the same interview, however, he contradicted himself: "I don't think I'm very open to new experiences. I hope to become more open after the exchange and more willing to try new activities".

At this juncture, Gao Lin did not feel qualified to be a global citizen as he had not travelled outside the Chinese world. By studying in the USA, he expected to become more global-minded. His pre-sojourn survey revealed that he had little interest in international affairs and only read a newspaper or Internet report about global issues once a month. By his own admission, he paid scant attention to affairs outside China. Similar to the other interviewees, Gao Lin had not taken any courses that focused on intercultural communication, anti-racist education, or intercultural transitions. At this stage, he did not believe that a course of this nature would be necessary or beneficial.

2.5 Intercultural Transitions: The Impact of the Hong Kong Sojourn

As Gao Lin had spent nearly 2 years living and studying in Hong Kong by the time the first interview took place, he was asked if he believed that this experience would impact his sojourn in the USA.

I think it'll help me to adjust more easily to life in the West. Because English is the medium of instruction in my Hong Kong courses, this will help to reduce my language pressure abroad. Studying here also makes me more connected to the international community in terms of thinking and more tolerance of other cultures... Compared with studying in the Mainland, I've gained self-discipline in a less rigid, more open, and liberal environment. I've never regretted my choice of studying in Hong Kong. It's been good preparation for my future studies and work in a different culture or country.

His views about Hong Kong were very positive. Interestingly, he stressed several features that he expected would also be present in the USA, such as openness, freedom, liberalism and tolerance of diversity.

2.5.1 Anticipation and Anxiety on the Eve of Departure for the USA

Prior to his departure for the USA, Gao Lin experienced conflicting emotions, which were quite similar to those of the other interviewees who had not yet travelled outside Greater China. He expected to encounter some prejudice in a Western country and imagined that his sense of identity would strengthen accordingly. Proud of his nationality and ethnic heritage, he was sensitive to negative perceptions of Mainland Chinese:

I feel great about my identity now. I'm not confused about who I am, but I think my understanding of it will become stronger after the exchange. While it's not bad to be defined as a Mainlander, I really don't like some prejudices against the Mainland. I admit there's a negative perception of Mainland China but I hope my own actions might change people's views about Mainlanders for the better. (Interview #1)

Through his behaviour, he aimed to combat negative images and stereotypes of Mainland Chinese, and create a more favourable impression of his homeland. He was also keen to see if his vision of the USA would match his experiences:

I'm excited because this will be my first time to go abroad and see the Western world with my own eyes. I'm a little worried that I might not adjust quickly because my English is still poor. What I'm looking forward to the most is to see the true America and to make some friends with locals.

Gao Lin's words suggested that he was open to challenging preconceived notions of 'the West'. His desire to experience "the true America" implied that he doubted some of the images that were presented in the local media and textbooks.

2.5.2 Intercultural Contact in the USA

Contrary to his expectations, after arriving in North Carolina he began to spend most of his free time with Mainland Chinese. This continued throughout the semester, even though he chose to live on campus and share a room with a student from Ireland. In his post-sojourn interview, he discussed how his social network took shape:

I spent nearly all of my free time with other Chinese. There was not much I could do about this. When you arrive in the USA, you naturally come together. And when they invite you to do things, you can't really reject them. Before long, you are doing everything together. Therefore, the time that I spent with foreigners was little. I imagined that I'd spend much of my time with them practicing English, learning about their culture, and all, but it turned out difficult to realise. On the one hand, it was already difficult for us to enter their circle; on the other hand, you are spending most of your time with Chinese people... When we were newly arrived, we joined a gathering that all the Chinese in the school attended. We had dinner together and made friends through the Chinese Student Association. I also went to a Chinese people's church. It was easy to make Chinese friends and we played basketball and badminton during weekends. In the end, I just hung out mostly with Chinese people...

Consistent with the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Adler et al. 2013; Byrne 1969), Gao Lin attributed the lack of diversity in his social network to a shared linguistic and cultural background drawing ethnic groups together. Other investigations of international students in the USA and elsewhere have also found that many find it difficult to develop friendships with host nationals for a variety of reasons (e.g. cultural differences, prejudicial attitudes or a history of problematic intercultural relations) (Gareis et al. 2011; Hendrickson et al. 2011; Williams and Johnson 2011).

In Gao Lin's view, cultural barriers made it difficult for him to build strong bonds with Westerners, including his Irish roommate:

My roommate and I didn't really bond. Sometimes at night we talked a bit about our cultures, hobbies, and all that, but we rarely went out together. He always joined parties which I don't like. The differences between ethnic groups are huge! There were basically no Asian people in his group of friends. Asians seldom hang out with Europeans. I don't think I saw any Asians who really fit into their group. If there were, they were American-born Asians. They call themselves Americans not Chinese or Korean or Japanese, etc. They're Americans not Asians.

Although making friendships with host nationals had been a priority prior to the sojourn, nearly all of the PRC interviewees returned home disappointed, as they found it very challenging to break into social networks composed primarily of non-Asians. Gao Lin reflected on the segregated spaces that he witnessed:

We Mainland students were always together. Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese people sometimes hung out together, too, but we seldom talked to those Americans, Europeans or Australians... My Irish roommate studies in Scotland and he was always with those Scots and Aussies. First, I think it's because of the language. After all, they're native speakers of English, though there is American English, Australian English, Irish English, and all that. They can have good communication with each other. Also, they're all Caucasians and we're Asian. They came together faster because of similar habits and interests, like football. For us, we know about soccer but we don't play football so they hung out together, partying or playing football, while we played our basketball... On weekends, locals mostly partied and I preferred to read or join activities organised by the Chinese. I expected to spend more time with Westerners but it didn't turn out that way.

Near the end of his post-sojourn interview, Gao Lin was asked if he would do anything differently if he had the opportunity to spend another semester in the USA. Significantly, he responded: "Yes. I think that I should communicate more with foreigners. I spent too much time with other Chinese. It's not bad but the purpose of an exchange is to get to know more about the host culture".

2.5.3 Stereotypes and Reductionism

Similar to the other returnees, Gao Lin often compared elements in the USA with those in Hong Kong. His post-sojourn interview was punctuated with 'us versus them' discourse, with the characteristics of some American students extended to all Westerners, as in the following excerpt:

In the USA, I saw many things that differ from Hong Kong. For example, the culture and the living habits are different. The locals have parties every Thursday night. There are many party animals! I don't see this in Hong Kong... The Americans have parties from Thursday to Sunday night. I didn't dare to go. I can't drink as I'm not yet twenty-one. Their parties involve drinking all night and I'm still a bit scared of that. I just don't like it—not like the Westerners; they're all crazy about them.

Negative impressions of 'Westerners' intensified when he experienced an unsettling incident in New York near the middle of the semester. In his post-sojourn interview, he recalled how this visit challenged some of his idealised notions of America.

When we visited New York City, we met two Chinese girls in a youth hostel. While one was taking a bath, her friend saw a Black woman rummage through her friend's bag. When her friend discovered that some of her money was missing, we helped them by calling the police. The policeman said he couldn't arrest the Black woman because the girl hadn't clearly seen her take the money. Finally, we just gave up. I think that American culture is different from ours. The way they see this kind of thing is different. I think the girl should have been counted as an eye witness. Maybe the policeman was bullying us... Our English isn't fluent and perhaps they were biased because we were foreigners.

Gao Lin gave a range of possible explanations for the poor outcome: a biased policeman who bullied foreigners, a language barrier, and cultural differences. Later in the interview he added: "America is generally similar to my imagination but there are some differences. The police are full of justice in American TV dramas; however, they are not that way in reality". While he had dealt with a single police officer, in his eyes, this individual represented all American police officers, and, not surprisingly, this tarnished his perception of the country.

2.5.4 Social Categorisations: Evolving Perceptions of 'the East' and 'the West'

In his post-sojourn interview, Gao Lin compared Hong Kong, Mainland China and the USA, drawing attention to ideological differences. In his comments it was again apparent that he engaged in social categorisation, that is, he placed people into boxes depending on their nationality or regional affiliation:

Hong Kong is very different from China. I think the differences between Hong Kong and America are not as great as between Hong Kong and China, because Hong Kong's ideology is a Westernised one. Hong Kong is a mixture of Chinese and Western cultures. Its traditional Chinese part is more Chinese than in China, and its Western part is, of course, more Western than China. I don't feel that there are many differences between Hong Kong and the USA. Hong Kongers and Americans are both extroverted in general, and American people are freer in thinking than Mainland Chinese... Asians work harder in academics than Americans. Students from Mainland China work the most. Hong Kongers are not that active in studying. The Americans don't value their grades very much. Actually, the culture and thinking of Americans are similar to those of people in Hong Kong. The Americans ask your political views and opinions about the Chinese government. When we meet people from Taiwan, we talk about politics, too. Exchange students from Mainland universities are more uncomfortable about this; we Hong Kong Mainland students are fine.

Gao Lin’s pride in his work ethic and special identity as a “Hong Kong Mainland student” impacted his perception of his positioning and attitudes towards the USA. Reductionism and stereotyping were evident in many of his comments, including the following, which also disclosed a prejudicial mind-set:

Now that I’ve had more exposure to Western culture, I think Western people are similar. The Scottish, Irish, Australians, and Americans are all similar... Western countries are quite similar to my expectations; however, I don’t like the culture of Arabs, South Americans, and Mexicans. I especially don’t like Arab culture. Maybe it’s because of a particular person I met.

As noted by Holliday (2011), the process of Othering entails the “constructing, or imagining, a demonised image of ‘them’, or the Other, which supports an idealised image of ‘us’, or the Self” (p. 69). Othering is also essentialist and reductionist in that the demonised image is applied to all members of the group or society which is being Othered. When a sojourner engages in Othering, it is difficult to develop meaningful intercultural ties in the host environment, and this then limits exposure to diverse communities of practice and reduces opportunities for learning.

2.5.5 Defending China in the West

Prior to his sojourn in the USA, Gao Lin had resolved to fight against negative images of Mainland China by behaving well in the host environment. After his return to Hong Kong, he was asked about this aspect of his sojourn:

[In the USA] I did help to introduce China to foreigners. They don’t really understand China. Everything they know is from surfing the net and the impression conveyed by their government. They only understand the old China. A Chinese friend did a survey and found out that many Americans’ impression of China is still Mao’s China, the one of thirty or forty years ago, so we introduce today’s China. I think Americans personally have nothing against Chinese culture but they dislike the country and its politics.

While cognisant of the limited knowledge of many Americans about “modern day China”, at many points in his post-sojourn interview, he appeared oblivious to gaps in his own understanding of the host country, and remarked that it had not been difficult to prepare for the sojourn as he “already understood American culture”.

2.5.6 Preferred Self-Identity: A Liberated, More Global-Minded Chinese

In his post-sojourn interview, Gao Lin was prompted to consider the possible impact of his international experience and intercultural contact on his sense of self. He believed that he had acquired a more hybrid, broadened identity, which he associated with “Western things, Hong Kong things, and Chinese things all mixed up together”:

RA: Do you feel that your identity has changed in any way?

Gao Lin: Not much. My values and beliefs didn't really change. My thinking is already close to the Westerners. My ideology is quite similar to the West. I believe in democracy, freedom of thinking, human rights, and all that. I also respect the hope of independence for the people in Taiwan.

RA: Do you think that your views about your national identity changed? Do you consider yourself a Chinese? A Hong Konger?

Gao Lin: It doesn't feel right to call myself a Hong Konger since I grew up in a different culture. I still regard myself as a Chinese. I guess I'm now more of a mixture. There are Western things, Hong Kong things, and Chinese things all mixed up together. Maybe I'm not a typical, mainstream China Chinese person. Although I'm more liberated, I'm still Chinese and I'll always be...

He professed to be "more liberated" and global-minded than traditional Chinese in his home country, and took pride in differentiating himself from his compatriots who had no international experience and little grasp of "Western ideology".

Before going abroad, Gao Lin had limited interest in international affairs and did not feel that he merited the label "global citizen" due to his lack of experience outside Greater China. After spending a semester in the USA, he believed that he had acquired a more global perspective, and, in his post-sojourn interview, he stressed the importance of universal values and principles, and a willingness to "know other cultures":

RA: Do you think you are a global citizen now?

Gao Lin: Yes, I think so.

RA: What does it mean to be a global citizen?

Gao Lin: I think a global citizen should accept different kinds of culture. You should respect the culture of others and not try to change others' thoughts. Your thoughts should be similar to the mainstream thinking in the world and based on universal values not a certain country's ideology. You should not reject knowing other cultures, especially mainstream Western cultures. You should be willing to know other cultures and have a global perspective.

In his post-sojourn survey, however, Gao Lin disclosed that he still only read a newspaper or Internet report about international affairs about once a month. Further, much of his interview demonstrated little growth in global-mindedness and intercultural sensitivity.

2.5.7 Renewed Dedication to the Advancement of Mainland China

After living abroad, returnees often see their home country through a different lens (Han et al. 2013; Jackson 2012; Kinginger 2009). Some reject their roots, while

others, like Gao Lin, draw closer, even when they’ve become more aware of limitations or “dark sides”:

After going to America, I discovered that it’s much better than China. The area where I lived in North Carolina is quite rich and stable. In contrast, some western parts of China are still very poor and undeveloped. I can see there are still many things to improve in our country, and I know that I’ll find it difficult to readapt to life in China. I went back home during the winter holidays and was quite unhappy to see the poor qualities in my country. People are still of a much lower standard compared to those in Western countries.

While disturbed by the poverty, governance and perceived “much lower standard” of some compatriots in his homeland, Gao Lin embraced his national identity and resolved to contribute to the country’s development.

Even after finding out about all the negative things in China, I’m not going to reject my Chinese identity. No matter how inferior my country is, I’m still Chinese... I don’t necessarily love the people ruling the country but I still love China. I really want to improve the situation there and make China a better place. I guess it won’t be easy to improve the education system, the economy, and everything. Anyway, I’m not going to go back to China immediately as I want to learn more before I return so that I can be a useful person for my country.

Armed with more knowledge and skills acquired in Hong Kong and the USA, he vowed to contribute to the advancement of China.

2.6 Advice for Future Student Sojourners

Towards the end of his post-sojourn interview, Gao Lin offered the following suggestions for other students who might go on exchange to the USA:

Learn English. Communicate with foreigners. Respect others’ culture, thinking, and ideology. Don’t try to impose your thinking on others. Try to build your relationship with people on a personal level; don’t bring everything to the level of national identity. Work things out. Find common interests with others. It will be much easier to fit in.

While he had not followed much of this advice, it is noteworthy that he had become more aware of steps that could be taken to optimise stays abroad. Interestingly, he remained determined to further his studies in the USA. Despite this, his social circle remained unchanged, and he interacted very little with international or local students in Hong Kong, still preferring to spend his free time with other Mainland students.

2.6.1 *The Merits of Pre-sojourn Preparation*

Although Gao Lin did not achieve his goal of intercultural friendships abroad and had difficulty connecting with people who had a different linguistic and cultural

background, he did not see the value of an intercultural communication course either before or after his sojourn in the USA. In his view, he had adapted “naturally” and a course of this nature was pointless:

I don't think it's necessary to take a course on intercultural communication. From my experience, if you're not studying about culture as an academic subject and you only need to adapt to a new environment for work or study, you can naturally achieve it. I adapted well in America even though I hadn't take any course in intercultural communication.

In reality, he had employed avoidance strategies and had spent nearly all of his free time with co-nationals, deviating from the goals he'd set prior to the sojourn. Although the frequent company of Mainland Chinese peers reduced his discomfort in an alien environment, limited exposure to local activities hampered his linguistic and cultural development. Even so, he continued to inflate his level of intercultural competence, cross-cultural adjustment, and understanding of the USA and ‘the West’, frequently resorting to Othering in his discourse.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter largely centred on a student sojourner's evolving perceptions of Self and Other (e.g. ‘Westerners’, Americans, Mainland Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese) and his own positioning in ‘the East’ (Hong Kong and Mainland China) and ‘the West’ (the USA). Internal dimensions (e.g. degree of openness, intercultural awareness, agency, idealistic notions of the ‘Other’, lack of confidence in his oral English, weak social skills, political attitudes, a defensive posture), and a complex mix of external factors (e.g. degree of host receptivity, cultural distance, a power imbalance between first and second language speakers, negative attitudes towards Mainland China) impacted the way Gao Lin's sojourn unfolded. While his own choices and actions reduced opportunities for intercultural dialogue, barriers in the host environment (e.g. an orientation that separated newcomers from locals, American social networks that were difficult to penetrate, a power imbalance) were contributing factors. Similar obstacles have been found in other studies that have explored the adjustment of international students in the USA (e.g. Gareis et al. 2011; Hendrickson et al. 2011; Williams and Johnson 2011).

While some of his fellow sojourners developed meaningful intercultural relationships (primarily with international exchange students from other Asian nations), a sense of belonging in the new environment, and a more inclusive, “global self”, Gao Lin found it difficult to achieve his sojourn goals and returned home with reinforced stereotypes of host nationals (‘Westerners’), an inflated perception of his intercultural competence, and little change in his social network. On a more positive note, he developed a stronger commitment to helping his homeland advance, and was still motivated to undertake postgraduate studies abroad. Like many other investigations of student sojourners, significant variations were

found in second language socialisation, intercultural learning and sojourner identities (Coleman 2013; Jackson 2012; Kinginger 2013; Vande Berg et al. 2012).

The developmental trajectories of Gao Lin and his peers underscore the complexity of education abroad (Coleman 2013; Kinginger 2013), and the negative consequences of idealised or demonised representations of 'the Other' (Dervin 2011; Holliday 2012). Interventions, such as pre-sojourn intercultural communication courses, can help combat stereotyping, otherisation and prejudicial mind-sets by encouraging the setting of realistic sojourn aims, ongoing critical reflection and more meaningful intercultural relations, as well as the honing of effective language and culture-learning strategies, among others. More research and advances in pedagogy are essential to realise the full potential of international exchange programmes and other forms of education abroad.

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