

On the Identity of Overseas Returnees in China: Is It a Communication Failure or What?

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In recent years, many Chinese graduates from Western Universities have come back to China with either a MBA or Ph.D. They are called Haigui (overseas returnees). The purpose of this paper is to describe what they have encountered in communication with either the Chinese administration system or the society on the whole, in the new environment—their motherland. What makes communication possible? Language is not the only answer. Cooperation and coordination are of paramount importance. Interviews were carried out for the study. Questionnaires were used to elicit data. The results of a pilot study showed that the overseas Chinese returnees experienced more than reversed cultural shock. It is the Chinese social environment and their double identity that gives them a hard time in communication. In other words, it is not the cultural identity alone that is hindering their communication in China; rather, it is a combination of their social, cultural, personal, and psychological identities that makes them fail in communication with their Chinese community. Their experience abroad definitely changed their world outlook to some extent and they have a double identity now. That is why these overseas Chinese returnees feel uncomfortable when coming back to their motherland. Further research is definitely needed to explore this uncharted territory.

With the development of globalization, China is emerging as a country which badly needs talented people from every corner of the world. Among them, Haigui (Overseas returnees) account for the majority. However, upon returning to their motherland, they feel a little socially, psychologically, and culturally uneasy with the environment. Why does this happen? Here, the author explores this phenomenon by doing research and attempting to find out the answer.

Culture and Identity

We could label an environment as culture. However, such a label is not accurate. According to Ng (1985, as cited in Ho, 2006, p. 18), culture is “how people perceive themselves and their relationship to the world.” Culture is never static; it is evolving and changing all the time. According to Marsella (1994), culture is a shared learned behavior which is transmitted from one generation to another for the purposes of either individual or social survival, adaptation, and development. Culture certainly includes such elements as one’s values, beliefs and cognitive approach. These elements, with the shift of environment, could also change. Therefore, culture itself will change. Luckmann (1999, p. 22) observes that:

Although culture provides strength and stability, it is never static. Cultural groups face continual challenges from such powerful forces as environmental upheavals, plagues,

wars, migration, the influx of immigrants, and the growth of new technologies. As a result, cultures change and evolve over time.

Nowadays many Chinese college students wear jeans. This was impossible 30 years ago. Thirty years ago, one couldn't imagine Chinese girls wearing short skirts performing on the basketball court as cheerleaders. The above mentioned phenomena show that Chinese people, especially young college students, have adapted themselves to Western living styles. However, in terms of social behaviors, there is still a big gap between China and the Western world. As a result, Overseas returnees in China will feel differently about what they should and shouldn't do publicly. Confrontation occurs between those who have overseas experience and those who do not. They don't have shared beliefs and values any more. A clear example was a small occurrence during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Li Na, a well-known Chinese tennis player, shouted to the audience to "shut up." Li was expecting the audience to be quiet because this was a tennis court. Li's experiences abroad had fostered this belief. She has changed, but the Chinese audiences have not. Even though the Chinese culture has been changing and people are beginning to accept the change, only those who have more overseas experiences demonstrate most of these new cultural characteristics. For example, Chinese athletes have been humble and obedient for a long time, never showing their emotion openly. Nowadays, they kiss the racket, the gold medal, and even their sweethearts. For example, Lin Dan, a well-known badminton player, once dropped to his knees, waved his fists in the air, and shouted loudly while celebrating his championship victory. It is my argument that those new cultural characteristics will be reflected most in those overseas returnees. Consequently, as a member of certain culture, a person's identity, impacted by another culture, could change as well. It is my argument that one's knowledge, beliefs, values and cognitive approach are what matters most in analyzing one's identity. Your world view is of paramount importance in representing your identity. Hall (2002, p. 22) makes a unique point about world view:

Often, world views operate at an unconscious level, so that we are not even aware that other ways of seeing the world are either possible or legitimate. Like the air we breathe, world views are a vital part of who we are but not a part we usually think much about.

"You are what you know." Identity is the process of discovering who you are. It could be ethnic, cultural, and social. Similar to culture, it is never static, changing all the time.

West and East: Individualism vs. Collectivism

Western culture prefers individualism and Chinese culture prefers collectivism. This is a fundamental difference between Western culture and Chinese culture. According to Samovar and Porter (2004), the most important cultural pattern in the United States is individualism. In fact, other American values such as equality, human rights, and freedom, etc., come from individualism. Countries, such as Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, tend to lean towards individualism. In such individualistic cultures, everyone is entitled to his or her own property,

ideas, and freedom.

Contrary to individualistic cultures, people in collectivistic cultures put stress on loyalty to the group, valuing cooperation and organizations. China has traditionally been a collective culture in which every individual is supposed to be submissive to collectivism. One shining example is the 1960s case, in which Chinese pingpong player Xu Yin-Sheng had to play a fake match with Zhuang Ze-Dong in order to let him win the championship in the name of collectivism or national interest.

We notice that the two types of cultures have different values and behaviors. In individualistic cultures, people emphasize the importance of individual interests and achievements. In collectivistic cultures, people value more of the organization or group's interests. At the cultural level, the cultural norms stress individuals' goals over group goals in individualistic cultures, and they stress group goals over individuals' goals in collectivistic cultures (Triandis, 1994).

New Development in I-C Category

With globalization occurring worldwide, everything is changing so rapidly and culture is no exception. For example, a common Chinese greeting was "Have you eaten yet?" This is not nearly as common as it used to be, especially in cities, where people now say "Hi" instead. Therefore, the new generation of Chinese people is balancing between collectivism and individualism. Collectivism no longer takes precedence over individualism. As a result, their values have changed. Such changes are found more clearly in the Haigui, who are puzzled by their own identities. Their experience abroad has made them what they are. Unlike those Chinese who were born in the United States or Great Britain and who are often referred as "bananas" (Yellow (Chinese) outside and white inside), overseas returnees are yellow on the outside, and yellow and white on the inside. They are the ones who deserve to be studied. They don't know who they are. The purpose of this research is threefold:

1. To what extent do the Chinese overseas returnees identify themselves as Chinese?
2. In what areas do they have problems with the Chinese society?
3. Can we find some answers to solve the communication issue?

The author of this paper tries to explain this phenomenon and analyze it both culturally and psychologically.

Methods and Procedures

This study is in the qualitative research paradigm and uses techniques of interviews, telephone interviews, and questionnaires.

Participants

There are 104 participants in this study who all have at least a Master's degree and have

experience living in the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, Germany, France or Great Britain for more than four years. The average age is 39, and most of them work in Chinese universities as professors or research fellowships. Nine have only been working for three months each year in China. The rest of them work regularly, just as other employees do. Nineteen of them have gained the citizenship of a foreign country. For the purpose of comparison, the author also asked 98 university faculty members to participate in the study, who had experience abroad for less than two months. Here, we label them as non-overseas returnees. There was a total of 202 participants in the study.

Procedures

Eleven of the participants were interviewed about their feelings, attitudes and experiences concerning their working in China as overseas returnees, either in person or through telephone interview. Three participants were interviewed for more than two hours, respectively. All the information was tape recorded for later use. Then, a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire was used to gather data for further analysis. My central thesis is that overseas returnees' long absence from China has posed problems to their Chinese identity, therefore, the focus is on finding out the problems and interpreting them, thus revealing their true identity.

Data Analysis

Before going into detail, it is useful to provide a general description about the findings. The results are mixed on one side, and are sharply clear on the other. The overseas returnees consider themselves Chinese from the ethnic perspective. However, they have a hard time identifying themselves in terms of values and communication with their superiors.

For ease in the data analysis, the overseas returnees Chinese are called ORC; the non-overseas returnees Chinese are NORC. It is clear to see that both groups identify themselves as Chinese by race. Still, there is a gradation for ORC group to give the responses. Thirty-four of them picked up the item "Agree" instead of "Strongly Agree." For the NORC group, all of them chose "Strongly Agree." The slight difference might not mean anything. However, ORC appeared to be more flexible about the statement, indicating that they were more open towards the outside world. If we change the statement of the questionnaire, what would the responses be?

Table 2 shows a different picture. The responses from both groups are spread out. The responses from the ORC appeared in all the five categories. For the NORC, only six respondents chose "Undecided." The other 92 respondents chose either "Strongly Agree" or "Agree." The interesting thing is that responses from ORC seemed to be a normal distribution. The returnee group apparently tended to be undecided with 29 respondents choosing "U," 17 chose "D," and 9 chose "SD." This sharply contrasted with the responses of the other group. The ORC in China seemed to be unable to identify themselves in this regard. Again, such phenomena clearly shows that identity is never static; it changes all the time with the change of

people's environment and experience.

Table 1. Statement: You are Chinese by race.					
Likert Scale	SA	A	U	D	SD
Responses by					
10 ORC	70	34			
Responses by					
10 NORC	98				

Note: SA = Strongly Agree

A = Agree

U = Undecided

D = Disagree

SD = Strongly Disagree

ORC = Overseas Returnees in China

NORC = Non-Overseas Returnees in China

Table 2. Statement: You are Chinese judging by values and world views.

Likert Scale	SA	A	U	D	SD
Responses by					
10 ORC	16	33	29	17	9
Responses by					
10 NORC	62	30	6		

Table 3. Statement: You have a hard time working in China.

Likert Scale	SA	A	U	D	SD
Responses by					
10 ORC	18	26	27	23	10
Responses by					
10 NORC		3	5	42	48

Again, Table 3 illustrates the differences between the two groups. For the ORC, although 23 respondents chose "Disagree" and 10 respondents chose "Strongly Disagree," there were 71 respondents who picked up "Undecided," "Agree" and "Undecided." For the NORC group,

only three respondents chose “Agree” and five respondents chose “Undecided.” The remaining 90 respondents in the later group all chose “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree.” All these indicate, to a certain extent, that overseas returnees have some problems working in China.

The responses by most of the NORC are simply “Strongly Agree” or “Agree.” Only three participants chose “Undecided.” To be exact, 76 participants chose “Strongly Agree” and 19 of them picked up “Agree,” thus showing that they really don’t have problems living in their motherland. By and large, they are accustomed to the environment in China. The responses by the ORC spread out across four out of the five categories, thus showing the discrepancies among them. Some of these ORC just can’t reenter the mainstream.

Interviews

Eleven participants were interviewed individually; information obtained from these interviews are much more revealing than the questionnaire. Here, we selected three interview participants as examples.

Example 1. Participant A, the first to be interviewed, has been in the States for more than 10 years. Asked in what areas he feels uncomfortable working and living in China, participant A answered that values are the key issue. If you don’t share the same values, you will have a hard time communicating with people. For instance, there is a special policy promulgated by the State Council concerning those with foreign citizenship working in China. However, in certain provinces, such policy is not carried out due to human factors. Whatever you do depends on the personal connections you have. That’s something participant A feels most uncomfortable with. He couldn’t believe that the first floor of a residence complex was changed into a factory that makes loud noise all day. The residents of this building have to suffer and no one really cares. In China, the scientific view of development is promoted nationwide. It is said that the essence of this theory is “people first.” In fact, the job is not well done in this regard.

Example 2. Participant B seemed more uneasy with traffic in China. Eight years living abroad fosters in him a habit of observing the traffic regulation. However, here in China, people jaywalk all the time. In addition, when the traffic light turns green, it is supposed to be the time for pedestrians to cross the road, but the drivers take no notice of the signal, showcasing their Audi, BMW or Mercedes-Benz. “You don’t have any sense of security. That is what I feel most uncomfortable about,” said participant B.

Example 3. Participant C thinks otherwise. She believes that time will remedy the situation. When she first came back from abroad, participant C also had to adapt herself to the new environment. For instance, she didn’t like the idea of going to so many get-togethers. As a result, her colleagues considered her weird. She took her friend’s advice and went “with the flow.” Now, she is very happy living in China.

Table 4: Statement: You feel very comfortable living in China.

Likert Scale	SA	A	U	D	SD
Responses by 10 ORC	28	36	29	11	
Responses by 10 NORC	76	19	3		

Conclusions

There might be a need for constructing a national identity (Wodak, 2008). However, for the overseas returnees in China, they are more or less in a dilemma, if not in an identity crisis. As pointed out by Vieira and Trindade (2008, p. 37), "Socialisation and learning experiences throughout one's life change one's personal identity." The returnees must have been impacted by the Western ideologies in terms of values, human rights, and world views. They are "sitting on the fence." Generally speaking, people from the same culture understand each other better than people from another culture. On one hand, they want to identify themselves as Chinese and they cherish the Chinese legacy. On the other hand, their experiences abroad have made them a kind of "banana" and they more or less feel frustrated. The results show that it is the Chinese social environment that makes communication challenging. In other words, it is not only the cultural identity that is hindering their communication in China, but also their social, personal, and psychological identity that makes them fail in communication with other Chinese.

In summary, we conclude that there is no identity crisis for these Chinese Overseas Returnees yet. However, they seem to have a double identity. That is to say, they do have a somewhat difficult time communicating in China. Culture is about perfection (Giles & Middleton, 2008). Coming back to China that is still imperfect in some respects by their judgment, the overseas returnees in China must feel uncomfortable. However, with the progress of globalization in China, the situation will be remedied because we are in the same world and share the same dream.

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Appendix

Biodata and Identity Attitude Scale

Date: _____ Name of Participant: _____

Age: _____ Gender _____ Degree Earned _____

Birth Place (indicating City or Province) _____

Native Language _____ Years of Learning English _____

Area Where You have Spent Most of Your Life _____

Residence Length in a English-Speaking Country _____

Name of the English-Speaking Country _____

School from Which you Got Your Last Degree _____

Current Company or University for Which You Work: _____

- | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|
| 1. You are Chinese by race. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 2. You are Chinese judging by values and world view. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 3. You have a hard time working in China. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 4. You feel very comfortable living in China | SA | A | U | D | SD |