

**“Middling” Chinese returnees or immigrants from Canada?
The ambiguity of return migration and claims to modernity**

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Abstract: This paper investigates the conceptual overlaps between transnational return migration and immigration by drawing on a qualitative study of Mainland Chinese return migration from Canada. The paper argues that reframing return migration as a distinct type of immigration draws attention to the citizenship vulnerabilities experienced by “middling” returnees that are not privy to the preferential treatment given to highly skilled returnees. They become considered as “foreigners” in their homeland because they have naturalised elsewhere. The paper also explores the double diasporic identifications of Mainland Chinese returnees from Canada; it highlights the tensions and fissures manifested in secondary diasporas, particularly in light of China’s growing prominence in international business, foreign diplomacy and cultural exchanges. The paper suggests that social encounters marginalising such migrants in Canada are reproduced in China. The returnees navigate such encounters by mobilising their transnational affiliations to different national contexts.

Keywords: Immigration; return migration; diaspora; modernity; China; Canada

Introduction

Transnational migration is recognised widely as a defining feature of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) today and garners considerable policy and academic attention. One approach towards the study of migration in and out of China focuses on emigration, return and subsequent circulatory migration trends observed amongst highly skilled migrants (e.g. Zweig, 2006; Shen and Chiang, 2012). Such a focus corresponds to a wider literature on the “brain circulation” of a country’s diaspora as a means of promoting economic development in the country of origin (Saxenian, 2006). Another approach is characterised by a new attentiveness to immigration trends in China. While China is seen traditionally as an emigration source country (Xiang, 2003), this is changing with the arrival of immigrants from a variety of countries that are converging on China for diverse reasons, including education, trade, business and work opportunities (Pieke, 2012). Chinese return migration, the focus of this paper, can arguably be seen as a distinct type of “immigration” in cases where the returnees have already naturalised in another country and given up their Chinese citizenship and *hukou*¹ status in accord with a dual citizenship restriction practised by China (Cheng, 2005).

¹ The *hukou*, or household registration system, in China can be likened to a domestic passport system that confers rights at the local level, such as housing and educational subsidies or jobs in government

This paper focuses on Mainland Chinese returnees who spent a number of years in Canada and obtained Canadian citizenship through skills-based immigration programs. Some returned to China individually but many others relocated as a family unit to maintain familial cohesiveness. In such family relocations, even if one member (usually the husband) retains Chinese citizenship, the other family members (i.e. the wife and children) have usually acquired Canadian citizenship before moving back to China. This arrangement subjects the family unit to immigration restrictions in China if they intend to remain in the country together. Returnees who come back to China on a foreign nationality status are required to apply for immigration visas to remain legally for an extended period of time. This reverse migration to China is distinct from the *guiqiao*, namely PRC-born Chinese returnees who went abroad but retained their Chinese nationality. It is also dissimilar from the long-standing category of *huaren*, referring to the progeny of the overseas Chinese that have foreign nationality status by descent. Studying the situation of the Mainland Chinese returnees contributes to conceptual advancement on the overlaps between return migration and immigration, two analytical categories that are normally considered apart.

This paper departs from the conventional focus on highly skilled Chinese returnees and highlights the ambiguities of return experienced by those who belong to the “middling” (*zhongdeng yimin*) socio-economic stratum. Unlike their elite counterparts, middling returnees are not privy to state- and company-sponsored entitlements designed to entice them to return. Rather, they come back to China independently, often after experiencing a period of deskilling or sub-optimal job prospects in the country where they had sought permanent residency or citizenship. Conradson and Latham (2005a) introduce the conceptual category of “middling” migrants to highlight this spectrum of migration that has been neglected thus far as a result of the prevailing focus on highly or lowly skilled migrant labour. Yet middling migrants also deserve study because their socio-economic status impacts their social positioning, not only when they migrate abroad (see Nonini, 2004; Mar, 2005), but also during return migration. This form of return migration is qualitatively different from earlier trends because of the returnees’ deskilling experiences abroad and their foreign nationality status in China. Moreover, their legal and emotional ties to Canada, coupled with middling socio-economic backgrounds, result in a distinctive set of challenges that they and their family members face when resettling in China. As “new Canadians”² now living in China, they can also be regarded as a “secondary diaspora” belonging to Canada in addition to identifying as part of the Chinese diaspora.

China’s rising prominence in international business and geopolitical power engender renewed claims to an ascendant Chinese modernity. Several scholars argue that with the extraordinary rise of the economy and China’s role as a world power, the Chinese have growing confidence in national thought, identity and practices³. These arguments resonate with earlier claims of “Asian values” propagated by successful

that are reserved for those with local *hukou* status. Giving up Chinese citizenship is tantamount to relinquishing one’s *hukou*.

² The label, ‘new Canadians’, refers to immigrants who arrived in Canada in the last ten to fifteen years and have taken up Canadian permanent residency or citizenship status.

³ These range from political philosophy such as *tianxia* (all-under-heaven) to purportedly distinctively Chinese norms like *xiao* (filial piety), *mianzi* (‘face’) and *guanxi* (personal connections).

East Asian developmental states and a parallel set of scholarly views advancing the idea of alternative or multiple modernities (e.g. Eisenstadt, 2000; Tambiah, 2000). However, as Dirlik (2010, p. 30) suggests, adopting a view of multiple or alternative modernities does not illuminate the “proliferation of spaces and the contradictions they present”. Building on this scholarship, this paper considers the expression of distinctive modernities (anchored usually in national identities) that emerge during seemingly routine encounters between Mainland Chinese returnees from Canada and Canadian-born Canadians living in China. Their interactions result in the reproduction of Oriental and Occidental identity politics, despite the claims to cultural competencies asserted by the Mainland Chinese returnees over the Canadian-born Canadians.

To recap, this paper aims, first, to investigate the conceptual overlaps between return migration and immigration by considering the situation of Mainland Chinese returnees who have been naturalised abroad. Reframing return as a form of immigration foregrounds the citizenship vulnerabilities and class fluidities experienced by such middling returnees. Second, the paper develops the concept of secondary diasporas by analysing the tensions contained within this status. We show how the Mainland Chinese returnees, who are now considered “new Canadians” living abroad, continue to experience cultural marginalisation and social exclusion in their interactions with the Canadian diaspora represented in China. They navigate such interactions by mobilising their transnational affiliations to different national contexts.

This paper draws on in-depth interviews and participant observation methods to study the experiences of Mainland Chinese immigrants in Canada and return migrants to China⁴. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted in Vancouver with Mainland Chinese immigrants still living in Canada, followed by another thirty interviews with return migrants in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. This paper focuses on the latter group. The interviews with returnees, carried out in Mandarin and English, explored their return migration motivations, experiences and future intentions. The interview respondents are mostly in the 30-40s age range, have tertiary qualifications and had accrued substantive professional or business experience in China before they migrated to Canada. Many of those still in Canada have experienced deskilling, and many of the returnees say that actual or perceived deskilling prompted their return migration. Of the latter group, more than half are Canadian citizens. The remainder are permanent residents but their family members have obtained Canadian citizenship so the family unit is still subject to immigration regulations in China. The interview extracts in this paper were translated by one of the authors. Additional participant observation was conducted at social events organised by Canadian associations in China. The reflections were recorded in a research diary after each event.

The next section sets out the relationship between the literature on transnational migration, diaspora and middling migration. This section also discusses the intersection between Chinese migration and notions of modernity. Then we examine the motivations for Chinese return migration and the complications arising from the foreign nationality status of such migrants, which together with their middling socio-

⁴ The overall study included a discourse analysis of Chinese and English language policy documents and news reports but this will not be addressed in detail here.

economic backgrounds, precludes them from the preferential treatment given to highly skilled returnees. The next section brings into view the ties they maintain with Canada during their stay in China. This discussion shows that as part of a secondary diaspora, they are keen to contribute to Canada by sharing with other Canadians in China the cultural competencies associated with Chinese modernity. Yet their desire for recognition by other Canadians is unrealised as a result of Oriental and Occidental encounters that they navigate by mobilising their transnational affiliations. The concluding section draws together the implications of these arguments for both China and Canada. It also advances conceptual arguments on return as “immigration”, middling migration and the multiple claims to modernity asserted by secondary diasporas.

Diaspora, middling migrants and Chinese modernity

The evolving fields of transnational migration and diaspora studies can be likened to converging tributary streams. Transnational migration emphasises the ties that emigrants retain with their homelands even if they have immigrated to other countries. These ties are sustained through material and symbolic means or by way of return visits (Basch et al, 1994). There is a case that transnational migration should be distinguished analytically from “diaspora” because the latter label should be reserved for groups that have been compelled to leave their homelands (i.e. a “victim diaspora”; see Cohen, 1997). Brubaker (2005, p. 1), however, observes that the meanings associated with diaspora have also been stretched to “accommodate the various intellectual, cultural and political agendas in which its service has been enlisted”.

Though there are distinct sets of literature on transnational migration and on diaspora studies (Blunt, 2007), recent work suggests that transnational migration and diaspora processes have become mutually constitutive in some respects. This is illustrated by Saxenian’s (2006) thesis that economic development is driven by the circulation of human capital represented in national diasporas, as members engage in recurring transnational migration patterns. A growing number of migrant-sending countries are “claiming” transnational communities as their national diasporas in order to gain access to their economic and political assets (Levitt, 2001; Larner, 2007; Ho, 2011). This paper examines the case of immigrants who have cultivated attachments to their host country but re-migrate subsequently to return to the country of origin. Even so they may still identify as the secondary diaspora of the host country they have left. We discuss the situation of Mainland Chinese returnees that not only claim belonging but also desire recognition as a secondary diaspora of Canada, while they are based in China.

These returnees are middling migrants because they cannot be easily classified as highly sought-after professionals and business migrants, nor as unskilled migrants or refugees, who are often devalued. Our respondents usually have tertiary-level qualifications and professional work experience, which equips them with the skills set to migrate abroad through the points-based system used by immigration countries. They also have sufficient family income to pay the fees associated with immigration applications and immigrant agency services. Several studies of middling migrants in immigration contexts suggest such migrants are willing to take initial jobs below their qualifications in exchange for anticipated future social mobility (Conradson and Latham, 2005b; Parutis, 2011). In a study of Indian immigrants working in London’s

hospitality sector, Batnitzky et al (2008, p. 63) argue that some of them come from middle-class backgrounds in India but after migration they perform “labour considered inappropriate for men of their economic class (like working as a room attendant)”. Immigrants that move from “developing” to “developed” economies, including the Mainland Chinese migrants being studied in this paper, share such deskilling experiences, and our interest is to consider the effects of deskilling on return migration. Although some returnees move up the socio-economic ladder again, earlier deskilling continues to influence their migration trajectories. As we will see, the class fluidities they encounter accentuate their citizenship vulnerabilities.

The relaxation of migration regulations in Mainland China from the 1970s onwards released emigration opportunities. Popular migrant-receiving destinations have also been promoting skills and business immigration for applicants who qualify through a points-earning or wealth-qualifying system⁵, such as in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These countries utilise immigration to address economic and demographic objectives. A substantial number of Chinese migrants relocated and applied for permanent residency abroad in this way with many seeking a transition to citizenship status. For immigration countries, recruiting global talent contains the promise of sustained economic growth (Shachar, 2006; Ley, 2010). For immigrants, international relocation provides opportunities to develop new career directions or global business opportunities (Nonini, 2004) while also enabling their children to access Western-style educational opportunities (Waters, 2002; Teo, 2007). They acquire citizenship rights in different countries through their financial resources and family dispersal arrangements (Ong, 1999).

Contemporary analyses of Chinese migration nevertheless suggest that the Chinese state brokers transnational mobility in order to repatriate the benefits of migration.⁶ Migration and development are interlinked through the transnational flows of people, finance, knowledge and skills transfer (Nyberg-Sørensen, 2002; Skeldon, 2008). As a means to this end, the Chinese state keeps in touch actively with the new Chinese migrants (*xinyimin*) who left China after 1978, which China regards as part of its diaspora.⁷ The return of overseas Chinese students and scientific or business elites is also strongly encouraged by various administrative units of the Chinese state and local government officials. The goal is to strengthen the nation’s role in the global business economy and promote Chinese representation in international diplomacy through soft ambassadorship (Zhang, 2009).

In fact, Nyíri (2001) argues that Chinese migration has been socially constructed as a patriotic act through which transnational links strengthen the Chinese state. Notions of Chinese achievements and status are exported through business investments abroad, foreign diplomacy by state leaders, international dialogues by key intellectuals as well as popular culture and language exchanges (Nyíri, 2006;

⁵ The criteria include migrants’ educational qualifications, professional and business experience, English language proficiency, investment capital and age.

⁶ Xiang (2003), however, cautions against portraying the Chinese state as a coherent apparatus because of a diversity of Chinese emigration cohorts and the multiple government actors involved in mediating migration.

⁷ Apart from the *xinyimin*, the Chinese diaspora also refers controversially to historical waves of ethnic Chinese dispersed abroad such as the *huaren* (overseas Chinese of foreign nationalities by descent); see Suryadinati (1997).

Callahan, 2008; Barabantseva, 2009). Ordinary Chinese migrants, however, are also important conduits in this project. For example, Chinese development staff, managers and labour migrants working abroad have been instrumental in exporting “modernisation” to “developing” countries through development projects and trade (Nyíri, 2006). “Modernity” in this sense connotes a temporal dimension in that it highlights new economic and technical achievements; however, selective aspects of tradition are still mobilised in the making of this modernity. Globalisation has led to assertions about the supremacy of a Western program of modernity encompassing political, economic, social and cultural value systems and structures. In response, the thesis of alternative or multiple modernities critiques the Eurocentrism inherent in such claims (Eisenstadt, 2000; Tambiah, 2000).

The current emphasis on Chinese modernity resonates with earlier claims of “Asian values” by East Asian developmental states during the 1990s. This claim led to scholarly critiques of purportedly distinctive “Asian modernities” or the “Asian turn” (e.g. Ang and Stratton, 1996; Chen, 1996, p. 41). Of these, Nonini and Ong’s (1996, pp. 13–36) exposition questioning the essentialism and ethnic chauvinism underpinning claims of “Asian” distinctiveness has received much academic attention. As Dirlik (1996) argues, Asian societies can be complicit in producing Orientalist discourses alongside Euro-American representations of Orientalism. In later writing, he adds that amidst a proliferation of claims to modernity, the contradictions in claims to multiple modernities have become ever more apparent (Dirlik, 2010, p. 29). We will develop this argument in the penultimate section, which considers how the Mainland Chinese returnees deploy multiple and opposing notions of self-Orientalism and Occidentalism.

Migration ambiguities: Chinese return as “immigration”?

Large numbers of Mainland Chinese migrants have gained entry and residency in Canada as economic migrants, through the skilled worker or business immigration programs. Mainland China was the leading source country for immigrants to Canada from 1998 to 2009, with an average of over 30,000 new arrivals each year (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012a). Skilled workers have to possess tertiary qualifications and substantial professional experience in China,⁸ alongside fulfilling other criteria such as demonstrating English language proficiency. Smaller numbers have arrived as business immigrants: they must manage and own an active business, or invest C\$800,000 in Canada. These applicants tend to be mid-career professionals or business owners in China but they immigrate to Canada for their children to have a better educational environment. Some also desire to challenge themselves in their career development by moving to a new work setting, but studies indicate that their economic goals are unrealised after arriving in Canada due to employment difficulties and integration barriers. It is not unusual for them to experience substantive deskilling and they struggle to provide for their families the lifestyle they had anticipated.⁹ Immigrants’ poor performance in the labour market is

⁸ Immigrants entering Canada under the skills scheme now have to acquire a job offer prior to entry or show evidence of at least one year’s continuous employment in a list of selected industries (CIC, 2012b and 2012c).

⁹ Shiye! Jianada huaren xinyimin chujing kanyou. *Nanfei Huaren Bao*, 22 December 2006, no page; Sancheng jiannada zhongguo xinyimin zao qishi. *Mei Qiaobao*, 16 January 2007, no page.

indicated in other immigration contexts using the points-based system as well, such as New Zealand and Australia (Liu, 2011).

Chinese families in such situations are likely to embark upon an “astronaut family” strategy. The main breadwinner, usually the male partner, returns to seek better income opportunities in China while leaving behind his children to be educated in Canada and his spouse to take care of the children’s needs. This family dispersal arrangement allows some family members to fulfil the residential requirements for renewing their permanent residency or acquiring Canadian citizenship (Waters, 2002; Teo, 2007). In this sense, the Mainland Chinese migrants fit the profile of “flexible citizens” used to describe their Hong Kong and Taiwanese counterparts (Chiang, 2008; Ley 2010). The challenges of transnational family separation loom large in this scenario and the pitfalls of transnational family life experienced by other Chinese migrants in Canada, such as parent-child estrangement and marital alienation, act as a cautionary alert to them.¹⁰ As one returnee said when reflecting on her decision to return to China to reunite with her husband, “Astronaut families encounter marital difficulties because the husband experiences loneliness when the wife and children are left behind in Canada.” Poor English language skills and a lack of common conversation topics as a result of their later socialisation into Canadian society make it difficult for lone parents to develop new social networks with the “locals”.¹¹ The interplay of these factors results in more Mainland Chinese families deciding to relocate most, if not all, of the family unit back to China to maintain family cohesiveness and personal wellbeing. Yet by the time they return to China, some or all of the family members would have given up their Chinese citizenship and *hukou* status to naturalise as Canadian citizens. This presents attendant difficulties for the right of family members to remain in China unless they qualify for immigrant visas.

An overseas Chinese newspaper reported in 2006 that the returnees from Canada are highly skilled and in their forties.¹² It also claimed that they lived in Canada for up to ten years before moving back to China to start their own businesses. Our fieldwork (conducted in 2009–10), however, suggests that the returnees from Canada now span a broader age range, from the mid-thirties to mid-forties, and they may have stayed overseas for only two to five years before moving back to China. As returnees to the homeland they run their own businesses or become employed as engineers, IT specialists, and managerial or administrative staff. Some had suspended or scaled back their businesses in China to emigrate, while others experienced deskilling abroad, resulting in resume gaps and lapses in professional development that are difficult to explain to employers in China after their return.

The downward social mobility they experienced in Canada means they are neither entitled to the preferential treatment given by the Chinese state to elite returnees nor treated by their companies as expatriate hires. Giving up Chinese citizenship further disqualifies them from the social rights that are tied to citizenship status. As one male

¹⁰ These family traumas are experienced by astronaut households from Taiwan and Hong Kong too (Waters, 2002; Ley, 2010).

¹¹ The respondents use the label, “local”, to differentiate those born and bred in Canada from first-generation immigrants. The former category refers not only to Caucasian-Canadians but also 1.5- and later-generation descendants of other immigrant groups including earlier cohorts of Chinese migrants.

¹² Jiahuaren huiguo chuangye jianzeng. *Dongfang Shibao*, 15 June 2006, no page.

returnee who became a Canadian citizen observed: “I no longer have Chinese citizenship so if my employer contributes to pensions, unemployment or medical insurance, and the housing fund, I am actually not entitled to them. These count for almost 10 per cent of my income”. Women who naturalised in Canada and then reunited with their husbands in China are not given working rights under their dependant visas. Their longer employment gap because of child care duties in Canada (while their husbands returned to China) results in greater difficulty finding employers agreeable to sponsor their working visas, thereby contributing to gendered barriers to labour market entry.

These middling returnees from Canada are significant because of the ambiguity attached to their migration identities and status. They comprise a diverse category in terms of their occupational backgrounds, nationality status and lifestyles after return, but they share a background of emigration that was met with sub-optimal employment prospects in the country of immigration. They return to China independently rather than under the auspices of any government-sponsored programs. Their return migration to look for better paying jobs is followed by the subsequent relocation of most or all of the family members. Many of these returnees have been naturalised abroad; as foreign nationals on Chinese soil, they are required to obtain immigration visas to remain legally in China despite their personal histories, family ties and cultural affinities with the country. Mar (2005, p. 367) observes that “people from [the middling] strata are structurally the most anxious of subjects, insecurely poised between demands of material necessity and aspirations for upward social movement”. Our focus on the intersection between socio-economic and citizenship status deepens understanding of the citizenship vulnerabilities faced by middling migrants who have given up their birth right citizenship.

The return migration of former Chinese nationals, not only from Canada but also from Australia, New Zealand, America and Europe, is already significant¹³ and will continue to expand numerically with the economic rise of China.¹⁴ The country’s immigration regime is cognisant of the scale of Chinese return migration by those who have naturalised abroad. Recognising the growing diversity of reasons for return, the Chinese immigration authorities expanded the visa categories for returning dependants of Chinese citizens and extended the length of stay allowed for up to two years (*Jianada Jiayuan*, 2012). Yet these policy improvements do not address the dissonance experienced by middling returnees whose foreign nationality status disqualifies them from the economic and social rights that they had once enjoyed in China.

Despite disappointing experiences overseas, *all* the Mainland Chinese returnees interviewed claimed they will move back to Canada in the future. Their stay in China is a temporary sojourn motivated by the desire to earn more income for providing

¹³ For example, Ip (2011) estimates that over 300 000 former emigrants had returned to Hong Kong by 2007 of which 35 per cent came from Canada, 24% from Australia and New Zealand, 12 per cent from the UK and 11 per cent from the US. These statistics are suggestive of a broader trend of Chinese return migration to Mainland China as well in view of the similar challenges to settlement and integration they face abroad like their Hong Kong counterparts. A more thorough household survey in Hong Kong identified at least 300,000 returnees from Canada alone (Zhang and DeGolyer, 2011).

¹⁴ Meng xing shifen: yazhou ‘rencai’ huiliu de zhongguo jihui. *Jingji Cankao Bao*, 6 January 2011, no page.

their families with a better quality of life, to familiarise their children with the Chinese language and culture, or to care for elderly parents who would be left behind otherwise. They intend to re-migrate later in their life-course when their children are ready to enter the Canadian educational system or when they have accumulated enough savings to retire and enjoy their silver years in Canada. The sentiments expressed here corroborate the studies by Chiang (2011) and Ley (2010) on how Taiwanese and Hong Kong return migrants chart transnational sojourning over the life-course by framing Hong Kong or Taiwan as a place to work and Canada as a place for quality of life (including retirement). For the Mainland Chinese returnees in this study, future intentions to relocate to Canada result in a desire to maintain ties with Canada even during their stay in China.

Desiring Canada in China: the secondary diaspora

In this section, we turn our attention to the implications of the transnational attachments articulated by the Mainland Chinese returnees. Some have Canadian citizenship; others remain as permanent residents while their spouse and children become Canadian citizens (either by naturalisation or by birth for children born in Canada) then move back to China.¹⁵ Regardless of nationality status, these returnees claim dual belonging to China and Canada. As the broader literature on transnational migration attests, transnationalism need not negate attachments to the homeland nor the host country (Salaff et al, 2010). Migrants may experience a heightened sense of belonging to a particular country depending on their spatial location at that point in time, like the Mainland Chinese returnees discussed here who said they identify strongly with China while they are in Canada but their sense of belonging to Canada becomes salient when they are in China.

Given these attachments to Canada and their intention to relocate there eventually, the Mainland Chinese returnees maintain an interest in developments and events related to Canada. They keep up with news reports on Canada and express a desire to participate in events organised by Canadian associations in China about which they are informed. For example, a married couple that returned as a family unit to China said: “If there are activities organised by Canadian associations we will be interested because we lived there for eight years. Sometimes we feel that Canada is our home. We bought a house there and our child was born there. We return regularly to Canada even now.” Attitudes of attachment and a desire to retain ties to Canada while staying in China emerged regularly during interviews with the Mainland Chinese returnees, despite their past experiences of deskilling and social marginalisation. Another respondent expressed similar sentiments: “I would like to keep that connection [with Canada] and do something for it while I am [in China] but I don’t know what... I lived there for several years and I liked it even though life was not easy.” For such Mainland Chinese returnees, Canadian legal status and personal attachments classify them as part of the Canadian diaspora, a label that is gaining credence in Canadian business and political circles (e.g. Zhang, 2007; Cao and Poy, 2011). The Mainland Chinese returnees, conventionally thought of as part of the Chinese diaspora, have double diasporic identifications. The anticipated transient nature of their stay in China coupled with the neglect of middling returnees by the Chinese state work together to

¹⁵ This is so as not to jeopardise their chances of future return to Canada; if they remained as permanent residents they need to renew this status every five years by residing for at least two years residency period in Canada.

reinforce their identification with Canada as a distant home to which they plan to return in the future.

The social events organised by Canadian associations are a way for the Mainland Chinese returnees to sustain their overseas memories and social networks while in China, but they also have more pragmatic motivations. They hope to improve their English language competency by socialising with English-speaking Canadians in China. They believe that lacking proficiency in the English language not only contributed to employment barriers when they were in Canada, but also caused difficulty in interacting with English-speaking Canadians. Besides that, they worry that being immersed once again in a predominantly Mandarin-speaking society could compromise their ability to use their English language skills when they move back to Canada. As another returnee expressed:

I still feel that I am Canadian. I will attend activities to get to know people and practise my English. I haven't spoken English for a long time. If I go on like this I won't know how to speak English anymore. I still return to Canada every year and I pay my taxes as a Canadian citizen. It is also for the sake of my child [who is a Canadian citizen].

This interview extract reveals the multiple benefits this respondent anticipated in attending social functions organised by the Canadian associations: buttressing personal identity, providing a reference point for a Canadian child, maintaining language fluency, and establishing social networks with other Canadians. They seek contact with native English-speaking Canadians who are seen to embody not only fluent language skills but also cultural competencies as “real Canadians” (a term used frequently by returnees), however loosely this is defined.

The activities organised by Canadian associations in China are also expected to provide a platform for more equal interaction between the Mainland Chinese returnees and the native-born Canadians. As this returnee puts it: “we all came from Canada to China... Whether you are a Caucasian or Asian, you are in China to live and work so everyone can share their experiences, there is a common topic and you can all get to know one another.” In other words, there is a desire for mutual learning through the shared experiences of traversing geographical boundaries (Tu, 2002). This is because they are no longer “guests” as they were in Canada but now “hosts” in China with cultural knowledge, professional connections and social networks that can be shared with the Canadians they meet. As mobility and geographical context re-define the social relations of hospitality (Molz and Gibson, 2007), they hope that the conventional host-guest division that had penalised them in Canada can be corrected in China.

The Mainland Chinese returnees are keen to contribute to Canada during their stay in China. As one returnee puts it, they believe they can “be a bridge between Canada and China”. This way of thinking is explained by another respondent who said:

Canadian companies have to utilise people who know how to and can bridge both cultures. Returnees know the competitors, the customers and how to enter the Chinese market. These Canadian companies can use returnees as consultants and this would benefit both parties but the companies would benefit more.

The metaphor of a “bridge” is a recurring theme in the interviews and suggests that there are cultural differences that the Mainland Chinese returnees from Canada

believe they can help mediate. For example, another returnee who started a business after relocating to China explained the difference between the “Canadian way” and the “Chinese way” of doing business:

The Canadians are more rigid in the way they do things. They will follow protocols and rules whereas the Chinese rely on intuition most of the time. The Chinese also prioritise a sense of community, which is different from Canada.... Canadian business people [are] also less proactive compared to the Chinese.

Such attitudes, invoking self-Orientalising and Occidental mobilisations of identity, were repeated during other interviews.

Return migration and co-presence with other Canadians in China provide new opportunities for the Mainland Chinese returnees to assert an equal, or even superior, right to cultural knowledge and social space as well as affirm their national contributions to Canada. Yet these claims of Chinese cultural competencies might be read as performances of self-essentialising identities. As Yen and Santos (2009, p. 297) argue, the “Orient itself participates in its construction, reinforcement and circulation”. In the process, the returnees also impose Occidental views constructed of the Western “other” (Bonnett, 2005) as indicated in the earlier comparison between the “Canadian way” and the “Chinese way” of doing business. Mainland Chinese returnees are complicit in perpetuating selective stereotypes of cultural difference in their quest to stake a claim to complementary knowledge, but navigating putative cultural differences gives them a comparative advantage. As we will see in the next section, however, any anticipated social capital asset may be compromised through tensions manifested in spaces of co-presence, including the events organised by Canadian associations in China.

Navigating Occidental and Orientalist encounters in China

Despite the positive tone portrayed in the preceding discussion, discomforts and social tensions are apparent in spaces of co-presence shared by different types of Canadians in China. The Canadian associations we studied in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong mainly cater to university alumni and professional networks. They also cultivate links with Canadian consulates and chambers of commerce, but the majority of the Mainland Chinese returnees interviewed were unaware of the activities offered by these associations. Most returnees received their education in China thus they are not privy to these Canadian educational networks. The minority of respondents who participated in associational life had mixed feelings about these events.

The events we observed in the three cities showed over-representation by Caucasian-Canadians and later-generation Chinese-Canadians, and a smaller share of Mainland Chinese-Canadians. One of these events was organised by an association that promoted social networking amongst Canadians in China. A crowd of about thirty people mingled beside the wine and cheese buffet table in the function room that evening. The sound of polite chatter was accompanied by live music playing softly in the background. Amidst this, we noticed a group of six Mainland Chinese in a corner of the room, isolated socially from the rest of the guests. We approached them and found that two had returned from Canada and the rest were their guests. As the conversation warmed up, one of the returnees told us that they found the event had several small cliques that made it awkward for them to join the conversations. Few of

the other attendees initiated conversation with them; the barriers to socialising they found in Canada have been replicated in China.

The rising prominence of China in international business, foreign relations and cultural prowess results in growing confidence towards a Chinese modernity that, as indicated in the previous section, is expressed self-consciously by the Mainland Chinese returnees. They advance knowledge of Chinese business and cultural competencies, which puts them in a position to convey these to other Canadians in China. However, their aspirations for social and cultural recognition are unmet because, as middling returnees of Chinese ethnicity, few of them are likely to be recognised by the Canadian associations as bearers of specialised knowledge. Even in China the alleged superiority of Western knowledge prevails. For instance, a successful entrepreneur in the cultural industry told us that he felt slighted by a particular Canadian association because, instead of inviting him to its events, the organisers regularly invite his assistant who is a Caucasian-Canadian. In this manner the loss of face he suffered in Canada is repeated in his home country, an unwelcome affront indeed.

Another returnee who works in a senior position for a marketing firm in China remarked:

The returnees have experiences in Canada and China. They see Canadian products as their own national products and can promote them in China. But there is little of that taking place now in the resource or tourism industry. I am in marketing and I understand the Chinese market and Canada's attractions. I feel that its branding has potential but... every product has to go through a process of localisation. For example, I have seen the marketing strategy of a Canadian fashion apparel brand and they wish to expand globally but they have not considered the Chinese market.

In the view of this respondent, returnees like herself have a distinct advantage in that they are familiar with both China and Canada, but their expertise is not called upon by their Canadian counterparts that still prefer "Western" cultural intermediaries.

The preference for foreign speakers, perceived by the Mainland Chinese returnees as lacking culturally informed knowledge of China, results in other social tensions. We observed another event organised for an American business professor who had been invited to promote his book at a panel discussion. He told the audience, a mix of Chinese and Caucasian attendees, that foreigners can set the direction of change in Chinese society. He addressed topics ranging from human rights to business ethics and Internet freedom insensitively, and expressed criticism towards those adopting the *guanxi* way (using personal connections) to do business in China. At the end of his talk there was a charged atmosphere in the room.

One of the Chinese panellists, who told the audience she grew up in China but had been educated abroad and works for a multinational company, challenged the presentation for "its unfair view towards China". During the Q&A session, another Chinese woman stood up and introduced herself as a representative from another country's chamber of commerce. In a feisty manner she said "the *guanxi* way has been exaggerated by journalists and professors and it is important everywhere, not only in China". She concluded by stating that the professor had done a poor job of promoting his book and she would not be buying it. The audience responded with

sustained applause. Clearly, the exchange at this talk had offended the cultural sensibilities of the Chinese and at least some of the Caucasians in the audience. Yet the above intervention also suggests that common ground is sought between the East and West by way of attempts to frame *guanxi* relations in an international (not just a Sino-centric) business culture.

In a transnational world where migrants have multiple international business, professional and social ties, the claims to modernity made by the Mainland Chinese returnees are shaped in more complex ways than an East/West reference frame. Nonini and Ong (1996) observe that the subjectivities of Chinese transnationals are multiply constituted by the many directions they face, and notably between Asia and the West. Nonini and Ong, however, stop short of considering the ways in which the “West” has multiple sites of creation as well (Bonnett, 2005, p. 508). This point is exemplified by the deliberations of the Mainland Chinese returnees on how their ties with Canada are conditioned by their interactions with counterparts from other Western countries represented in China. For instance, one Chinese businessman who used to attend activities by the Canadian associations commented during the interview:

I feel that [the Canadian] activities do not attract mainstream entrepreneurs. They only have small businesses participating. I have stronger networks in China than what they can access. The US [association] is better so I would rather attend their activities.... I think the US embassy gives them a lot of support. But the Canadian one always makes you pay money. Why should I when I get very little out of it? They should identify influential persons in the circle in China and support them. These people have influence and can bring other influential people along. Instead the association only finds foreigners or other Caucasians. You are in China yet you still invite only Caucasians to talk about the China market. It is weird.

Returnees, like the respondent above, identify with not only China or Canada; they also have former educational affiliations and current business, professional or social ties with other countries in North America, Australasia and Europe. The above interview extract highlights two key points: first, seemingly trivial issues, such as the costs of participation, are aggravated by deep-seated perceptions of cultural prejudice and marginalisation by the Canadian associations in China. These sentiments deter closer affiliation with those representatives of Canadian society in China. Second, the response also demonstrates the manner in which the Mainland Chinese returnees from Canada navigate national affiliations other than those they have with China and Canada. Transnational migrants claim multiple cultural, social and economic ties that are shaped by their perceptions of Oriental and Occidental identities and modernities.

The preceding examples underline a contradictory desire by the Mainland Chinese returnees to identify the common ground that “Western” cultural systems have with Chinese societal structures, while simultaneously foregrounding their rights to cultural competencies as “insiders” in China. This is suggested in the discussion on how they position themselves as intermediaries that recognise the nuances of Chinese cultural systems but are able to frame them in a manner that will bridge cultural gaps with the “West”. Yet their transnational identities and affiliations make them prone to differentiate between various types of “Western” (in this case North American) modernities and affiliate themselves accordingly. Inasmuch as states and institutions

may appropriate narratives of modernity or mobilise diasporic belonging and contributions for national gains, migrants can affirm and undermine these elite-mobilised narratives selectively from their own experiences and goals.

The replication of social marginalisation in China as the Mainland Chinese returnees had experienced previously in Canada recreates an unwelcome social hierarchy in which they are always disadvantaged outsiders. In Canada their economic and cultural competencies had been devalued, resulting in integration barriers. Even after returning to China, they feel subjected to alleged “Western” superiority during their interactions with Canadians in China. To mitigate such social encounters, they advance claims of modernity drawn from their multiple transnational affiliations instead. While one view may construe these Chinese transnationalists as opportunistic capitalists, a more nuanced interpretation would be to foreground the social and cultural exchanges they encounter in embedded national contexts, contexts that are also transferred disturbingly from North America to China during re-migration.

Conclusion

This paper argued for the importance of studying the middling stratum of return migrants because of the class fluidities they experience, such as the way their labour market outcomes in China are shaped by earlier deskilling experiences in Canada. We also suggest that in cases where returnees have obtained a foreign nationality their return should be re-framed as a type of immigration. This conceptual re-definition highlights the overlaps between return migration and immigration while also drawing out the vulnerabilities experienced by such returnees because of their new legal status and the dissonance they encounter despite claims to cultural affinities with China. Further research studying middling return migration systematically, by occupation type or the countries from which they re-migrated, will help advance knowledge on this phenomenon, such as whether the brain circulation of the Chinese diaspora indeed benefits the Chinese economy or whether their legal, material and emotional ties abroad will result in sustained transnational trajectories. The gendered contour of return migration is also a productive potential research direction as suggested earlier in this paper.

Our research also showed that the Mainland Chinese returnees in this study identify with Canada and, as part of a secondary diaspora belonging to Canada, they desire to contribute to Canadian society as it is represented in China. To do so they advance their cultural knowledge of Chinese modernity, stressing its importance in the light of China’s growing prominence in the international business, foreign diplomacy and cultural arena. Fissures and tensions are nevertheless apparent in the way they continue to experience social marginalisation during interactions with other Canadians in China, for we see that awkward Occidental and Orientalist encounters are transferred geographically from one continental context to another. Their tactics for navigating such encounters include situating aspects of Chinese modernity as universal norms and mobilising transnational affiliations to align themselves with other Western national affiliations in China.

Analyses such as this contribute towards recent calls by scholars such as Bonnett (2005) and Dirlik (2010) to do more than acknowledge alternative or multiple modernities, and instead account for the power relations that implicate cultural processes of domination, co-option, subversion and resistance. Our dual-sited focus

on transnational links between China and Canada shows that “sticky” geographical contexts and the institutional structures of nation-states, such as immigration regulations, citizenship regimes and labour market outcomes, mutually implicate one another to produce the power asymmetries underpinning migrant subjectivities, family life and life-course trajectories.

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