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Understanding ‘integration’: Chinese ‘foreign talent’ students in Singapore talking about *rongru*

ABSTRACT

Studying abroad is an increasingly prevalent form of transient migration. How do international students understand their relationship with the host society and host nationals? Based on in-depth interview data, this article investigates the ways in which international students from China at a Singaporean university understand the idea of ‘integration’ (or rongru in Chinese). It is found that these Chinese students tend to define ‘integration’ in terms of friendly and everyday social interactions, but their understanding has a more or less assimilationist underlying assumption. This explains their generally modest self-evaluations of their success at ‘integration’. This article argues that this social and somewhat assimilationist understanding of integration might be explained in terms of the Chinese students’ cultural-linguistic ideologies about rongru, and the characteristics of their social space, position and circumstances in Singapore as academically capable ‘foreign talent’ students on Singaporean government scholarships.

KEYWORDS

international students
China
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foreign talent
integration
assimilation

INTRODUCTION

‘[S]ingapore as a multicultural society does not promote *assimilation*, but expects that new immigrants would *integrate* into different communities’ (Rahman and Tong 2013: 85, emphasis added). The contrast between the notions of ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration’ thus appears to be key in the Singaporean context – a context that has seen rising social tensions over the presence of foreigners and immigrants in recent times. This article investigates the sociocultural meanings given to ‘integration’ by a group of international students from China studying at a Singaporean university on full scholarships provided by the Government of Singapore. Being simultaneously international students (whose presence is necessarily transient) and suitable candidates for subsequent naturalization targeted by a Singaporean state hungry for talented human resources, these foreign students’ understanding of ‘integration’ has implications not only for locally embedded sociopolitical concerns in the city state, but also for broader theoretical discussions on multiculturalism and diversity as societies around the world become more globalized and cosmopolitan.

Today, international students make up an indispensable part of the global migratory ‘ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai 1991). The world has seen sustained growth in tertiary-level international student mobility in the past decades. Between 1990 and 2013, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship increased from 1.3 million to nearly 4.5 million, representing an average annual growth rate of 6 per cent (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2013). International student mobility in higher education is a complex phenomenon (Brooks and Waters 2011), and the boundary between international students as transient visitors on the one hand and potential immigrants or settlers on the other is often blurred. For example, Robertson (2013) and Baas (2010) have shown that, in the Australian context, the student visa is often the precursor to longer-term statuses such as work visas and, ultimately, permanent residence (PR) and/or citizenship. Recruiting international students has always been a strategy employed by the Singapore government to attract ‘foreign talent’ to work and settle in the city state. This is often accomplished by granting international students generous scholarships that oblige them to work in Singapore for a number of years after study (Yang 2016a). Similar linkages between international education and labour migration have been observed in North America (She and Wotherspoon 2013), Malaysia (Ziguras and Law 2006) and Japan (Liu-Farrer 2011).

This article investigates qualitatively how a group of student migrants from China understand the idea of ‘integration’ in their host context of Singapore. The significance of such an endeavour is at least threefold. First, while international students and their experiences have been studied extensively – notably by educationalists (e.g. Montgomery 2010) and inter/cross-cultural psychologists (e.g. Smith and Khawaja 2011) – there remains little effort that examines how international students conceptualize their own acculturating experiences. This article takes a ‘grounded theory’ approach (Glaser and Strauss 1968), which gives priority to social agents’ own experience and construction of social reality to study how a group of acculturating university students understand the notion of ‘integration’ in their immediate social context. Secondly, as shall be elaborated later, in both cross-cultural psychology as well as sociological research on migration and diversity, the ambiguity between ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’ is often a focal point of contestation. Investigating how these

two concepts are understood by ordinary acculturating subjects can help shed fresh light on the real-world implications of such theoretical constructs.

Finally, investigating Chinese student migrants' self-understandings of 'integration' is highly pertinent in the local context to this study, namely twenty-first century Singapore. As the city state today faces mounting challenges in regards to multicultural diversity and cohesiveness as a result of rapid and voluminous inflows of migrants (Vasu, Yeap and Chan 2014), the 'integration' of all manners of foreigners and immigrants has become a key policy objective of the Singaporean state, as well as a topic of significant scholarly interest (Yap, Koh and Soon 2015). Within extant scholarship, however, migrants' own perspectives on integration remain a missing piece of the puzzle. This article, using the case of Chinese undergraduate students, hopes to advance a small step towards filling this gap.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: first, a partial review of the concepts of integration and assimilation in existing scholarship is provided, with a view to identifying the ambiguities and tension between the two terms; this justifies why studying integration and assimilation is important theoretically. A context section then follows, serving to sketch a background picture of the Chinese undergraduate students as 'foreign talent' in Singapore. Subsequently, some details on the research methods, fieldwork and data are furnished before the key findings are presented. Finally, I discuss and conclude before pointing out some potential directions for future research.

INTEGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

Academic discussions about the concepts of 'integration' and 'assimilation' seem to be located in two bodies of scholarship: on the one hand, cross-cultural psychology about acculturation processes; on the other, sociological research on migration, diversity and multiculturalism. The first, being a branch of psychology, typically adopts a positivistic approach characterized by model-building based on multiple variables, hypothesis testing and quantitative analysis. The latter, in contrast, attempts to build a theory that goes beyond the normal unit of analysis in psychology (i.e. the individual or the group) to focus instead on sociocultural forces and institutions, with societies and communities here being the units of analysis. This article selectively draws on both sets of literature without being beholden to either perspective. The purpose of the following brief literature review is to clarify the relevant concepts which serve as reference points for the empirical inquiry.

Acculturation can be taken to mean the 'process of prolonged inter-group contact between two or more cultural groups and the changes that this purportedly brings in both the parties' (Bowskill, Lyons and Coyle 2007). 'In the international arena there is little doubt that John Berry has established himself as the leading acculturation theorist [...]. His bi-dimensional, fourfold model of acculturation has been used in the study of sojourners, immigrants, refugees and native peoples' (Ward and Kus 2012). It is in this model that one of the most widely used set of definitions about 'integration' and 'assimilation' is found. Simply put, Berry argues that acculturation approaches can vary along two dimensions: first, cultural maintenance (i.e. how much an acculturating individual or group values maintaining their 'root' culture); and second, cultural contact and participation (i.e. how much the acculturating individual or group values contact with and participation in the host or majority culture). When the answers to both questions are 'yes', or both scores are high, 'integration' is defined; when the level of cultural maintenance is low, but cultural

contact/participation is high, 'assimilation' is defined. In addition, 'separation' is the diagonal opposite of 'assimilation', while 'marginalization' results when the answers to both questions are 'no'.

One significant finding confirmed by subsequent research based on Berry's (1997) model is that integration is the optimal acculturation strategy (cf. Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2003; Berry et al. 2006); in other words, it is believed to lead to the most positive outcome. This makes it a point of great interest, not only for academic researchers, but also for practitioners and policy-makers, whether 'integration' is indeed adopted or practiced by individuals or groups undergoing acculturation. More fundamentally, it also makes it worth asking whether integration is indeed understood in accordance with Berry's model, particularly in view of Ward's (2013) recent observation that, despite integration having been designated the privileged acculturation strategy, the manner in which the concept is actually understood, experienced and articulated by acculturating groups remains insufficiently examined.

In contrast to Berry-inspired acculturation models in cross-cultural psychology, sociologists working on migration, diversity and multiculturalism have an approach to analysing integration which emphasizes sociocultural forces and institutions. Although Penninx's (quoted in Rahman and Tong 2013: 83) general definition of integration as 'the process of becoming an accepted part of the society' may seem beguilingly simple, the sociological unpacking of the term can be more nuanced. For instance, in his classic work on assimilation in America, Gordon (1964) distinguishes two basic dimensions to integration: the structural and the cultural. Engbersen (2003) views integration as taking place on three levels or in three spheres: (1) the functional; (2) the moral; and (3) the expressive. In Bosswick and Heckmann's (2006) fourfold typology of integration (comprised of structural, cultural, interactive and identificational fields), the structural can be viewed as corresponding with Engbersen's functional, as both designate the migrants' access to or participation in formal institutions. Meanwhile, the identificational corresponds with the expressive, as both concern the realms of subjective feelings and identity. While Engbersen uses the 'moral' category to refer broadly to sociocultural participation, Bosswick and Heckmann's distinction of the 'cultural' (concerning cultural norms and competencies) and the 'interactive' (concerning inclusion/acceptance in social networks and primary relationships) dimensions seems to offer stronger analytical power. In short, the sociological literature has highlighted the multidimensionality of integration, with culture being just one of the dimensions. This is in notable contrast with the psychological literature's accentuation of the cultural factor.

According to van Oudenhoven, Ward and Masgoret (2006: 641), 'In most multicultural societies, the current discourse centers on the question whether immigrants should assimilate or integrate'. Meanwhile, 'The term assimilation linguistically implies a referent to which immigrants and/or their offspring can become similar' (Schneider and Crul 2010: 1141). The sociological literature's multidimensional approach in fact reveals a useful insight: namely that the term 'integration' emphasizes structural aspects, such as participation in the economic life and formal institutions of the host society, whereas 'assimilation' is more pertinent where expressive domains such as culture and language are concerned. This explains Schneider and Crul's (2010: 1145) observation that '[e]specially with regard to cultural aspects the term integration actually means something pretty similar to "assimilation"'.

Due to the inherent conceptual ambiguities between the terms 'integration' and 'assimilation', some scholars (e.g. Snauwaert et al. 2003; Bowskill, Lyons and Coyle 2007) have observed situations where the two terms are confused, either intentionally or unintentionally, with problematic consequences for both academic research and policy-making. In view of this, it is imperative to study migrant subjects' own understandings of 'integration'/'assimilation', as this article seeks to do. In this article, existing definitions of terminologies (as reviewed above) serve as reference points rather than strictures or yardsticks for judging research participants' emic understandings. Ultimately, this article is more interested in exploring and interpreting social actors' own ways of understanding 'integration'.

CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS 'FOREIGN TALENT' IN SINGAPORE: THE CONTEXT

Singapore hosts a significant number of international students. The latest available data suggests that there were around 75,000 foreign students at all levels in the city state as of 2014, having fallen from the peak level of 97,000 in 2008 (and 84,000 in 2012) (Davie 2014). That a small city state should have such a significant presence of international students is due – apart from the attractiveness of Singapore as a safe, economically vibrant and English-speaking Asian global city – to the Singapore government's deliberate strategy of using international education as an engine for human capital formation (Ho and Ge 2011). In particular, the 'Global Schoolhouse' project, launched in 2002, initially envisioned a total of 150,000 international students by 2015 (Davie 2014).

The reasons why this ambitious target failed to materialize are manifold, but one important factor has been the rising dissatisfaction expressed by the Singaporean electorate regarding the rapid and voluminous inflows of migrants (temporary or otherwise), especially after the mid-2000s (Gomes 2014; Vasu, Yeap and Chan 2014; Yang 2014a). While authoritative statistics are lacking on the composition of immigrant inflows (due to its perceived sensitiveness), the Chinese certainly comprise one of the largest groups of foreigners in Singapore (Yim 2011). Consequently, tensions and controversies have arisen concerning the 'fault lines' between local Singaporean society and this group (Yeoh and Lin 2013; Liu 2014), with doubts being cast upon the latter's ability and/or willingness to 'integrate'.

With regard to international students from China specifically, there have been at least two well-known social media 'scandals' involving them offending Singaporean public opinion through anti-social speech or behaviour (cf. Yeoh and Lin 2013; Yang 2016a). Aggravating the matter is the fact that a significant portion of Chinese students in Singapore, including the offender in one of the scandals, are funded by the Singaporean government's People's Republic of China (PRC) scholarship schemes, through which tertiary and pre-tertiary Chinese students have been recruited at the rate of several hundred to 1000 per year since the mid to late-1990s (Yang 2016a). Because of this, and due also to mundane frictions in cross-cultural contact, Singaporean society has developed certain unsavoury imaginations and discourses about Chinese 'foreign talent' students (Yang 2014a; 2014c). At the level of everyday encounter in social spaces, such as local university campuses, experiences of mutual misunderstanding, prejudice and stereotyping have likewise been observed (Yang 2014b; 2016b).

Aside from these challenges, the urgency to examine how Chinese international students in Singapore understand the concept of 'integration' is further highlighted because, as scholarship-holders who are often bonded to work in the city state, these Chinese youths are more than transient international students. Although no authoritative data is publicly available, this author's long-term and ongoing research finds that the majority of 'PRC scholars' do sink their roots in Singapore by subsequently acquiring citizenship status and setting up family there. In other words, most Chinese foreign talent students recruited by Singapore eventually do become the latter's new citizens. As such, their approach to 'integration' in the local society has important implications for the evolving Singaporean social landscape in terms of multicultural harmony and cohesion.

RESEARCH SITE, FIELDWORK, METHOD AND DATA

The fieldwork underpinning this article was conducted in November 2015 at a major local university, which shall be referred to here as the 'University Institute Singapore' or 'UIS'. With a large and diverse student body, UIS is one of the three universities in which Chinese students on Singaporean scholarships are hosted. For the same reason that the ethnonational composition of immigration in general is not publicly known in Singapore, there are no authoritative statistics on the backgrounds of international students at UIS. However, as the government announced in the aftermath of the 2011 general election – which saw the local electorate register strong dissatisfaction regarding the over-liberalization of immigration – the number of foreign students in local universities would be reduced to 15 per cent by 2015 (Davie 2014); hence this figure seems a reasonable estimate of the current level. It is not known how many of these international students are from China specifically, but there can be little doubt that they comprise one of the largest foreign student groups.

Pursuant to the interpretive nature of the research questions, the method chosen for this study was in-depth interview. Through a PRC student organization at UIS, I distributed 200 research invitation leaflets to full-time undergraduate students of Chinese nationality. Research participants were incentivized with small tokens of appreciation for their participation, but there was no evidence that this had any undue influence over their response to this research. I also used the 'snowballing' recruitment strategy, which involved giving a few leaflets to every interviewee, and requesting they pass these on to friends and acquaintances who might be interested.

Through these procedures, I eventually managed to conduct eight in-depth interviews with thirteen students. Four of these interviews were one-to-one; the rest were in groups of two and, in one case, three interviewees. Table 1 below summarizes the basic information about these research participants. It should be noted that, although not most desirable, there is no reason to believe that the slight gender imbalance among participants impinged on the validity of the data, particularly given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study. It is also worth noting that one participant holding Singaporean PR status and one participant of Singaporean citizenship status were also interviewed. Both these two 'special' participants were included in group interviews where there was another Chinese student interviewee. The participation of these two 'special' interviewees was thought to provide useful contrast and stimulation to the discussion, which indeed

Participant	Pseudonym given	Sex	Age	Length of stay in Singapore (years)	Major of studies	Citizenship status
1	Oudi	F	19	2	Engineering	PRC
2	Jingjing	F	19	2	Engineering	PRC
3	Yuan Ye	M	23	5	Engineering	PRC
4	Ji Qiu	M	23	5	Engineering	PRC
5	Miao Ya	M	19	2	Engineering	PRC
6	Bangguo	M	20	2	Engineering	PRC
7	Peng Chun	M	22	4	Engineering	PRC
8	Lengchu	M	23	4	Engineering	PRC
9	Linghe	F	23	4	Engineering	PRC
10	Ziyun	M	20	1	Science	PRC
11	Xing Bing	M	22	4	Engineering	PRC
12*	Huixin	F	23	13	Arts and humanities	PRC (Singapore PR)
13*	Hu Xuan	M	24	11	Engineering	Singapore citizen (naturalized)

Table 1: Research participant information.

turned out to be the case. Apart from these two, the other eleven participants were all on full scholarships provided by the Singapore government, and thus fell into the category of 'foreign talent' that the Singaporean state hopes to turn into its future citizenry.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin), the common native language between the researcher and the interviewees. Interviews typically lasted 90 minutes to two hours each, and were manually transcribed in Chinese by the author. Coding and analysis were carried out manually using a coding template. Interview quotes were further translated into English by the author when being incorporated in the findings sections below.

UNDERSTANDING 'INTEGRATION'

A sociocultural emphasis with an underlying assimilationist thrust

When asked how they defined 'integration' (or *rongru* in Chinese), the first thing that occurred to virtually every interviewee was friendship; in other words, having local friends was considered an essential indicator of successful *rongru*. Quantity mattered: interviewees stressed that it had to be 'a sufficient number of local friends' (*zugou duo de*), as one of them put it (even though no figures were specified), or 'at least a sizeable portion of your social circle are locals', as another maintained. Quality equally mattered: as Huixin pointed out, *rongru* meant one has not just local friends, but 'close' local friends; similarly, Bangguo said, 'not just friends, but also good friends' (*buguangshi pengyou, erqie shi hao pengyou*). Thus, the PRC students at UIS essentially appeared to have a social definition of integration, since it emphasized social life and social circles or networks.

This definition reveals a desire for inclusion, acceptance and membership in a social sense or in certain social scenarios. Two interviewees explicitly

mentioned the scenario of cracking jokes or bantering as a litmus test for *rongru*. Ziyun, for example, alluded to an experience where he did not get a joke cracked by a Singaporean, resulting in awkwardness and mutual embarrassment. For him, this was a good illustration of integration failure. Linghe elaborated in the interview: 'Integration is nothing other than "hanging out" [*rongru jiushi wan'er*] [...] and the ability to chat in a leisurely way [*yule xingzhi de liaotian*]' . Because such kinds of social inclusion often demand a certain familiarity with local cultural idioms or backgrounds, it may be further asserted that the interviewees' definition of integration was a socio-cultural one.

It seems that there is an assimilationist thrust underlying this sociocultural definition. Hu Xuan, the Singaporean citizen who migrated from China at the age of fourteen and underwent naturalization two years later, explicated integration as follows: '*Rongru* for me is like behaving like a Singaporean. It's a bit like indigenization [*bengtū hua*] – remove all your previous traits, and become like a born-and-bred Singaporean. It's very difficult, of course'. Given Hu Xuan's background as a naturalized Singaporean, it is hard to tell if his opinion should be interpreted as his view on integration as a former Chinese immigrant or as a current Singaporean host. Regardless, most other interviewees broadly agreed that integration was about becoming like Singaporeans, though perhaps not completely the same, since the latter was an impossible task anyway. For instance, Oudi said '*rongru* is] when you interact with them [locals] just like they interact among themselves'. Bangguo used the Chinese idiomatic saying *dacheng yipian* – which can be roughly translated as 'to behave/become as one' – to describe what integration or *rongru* should look like, adding that 'you need to act/ behave just like a local most of the time'. Ji Qiu illustrated this same assimilationist thrust from the reverse when he remarked as follows:

If [the culture of] PRC students are exactly the same [*yimo yiyang*] as their [Singaporean] culture, then there may be no problem [of integration]. But there are too many Chinese students – it's like adding a big black blot to a white piece of paper. So they [locals] find it hard to get used to it.

It is important to stress that the interviewees did not openly endorse a fully assimilationist understanding of integration, nor did they simply equate integration with assimilation. However, this seemed to be mainly because they recognized that it was practically impossible for them to assimilate anyway. This was illustrated in Bangguo's remark: 'As for real integration [*zhenzheng de rongru*], of course it's impossible for us. Because we are, after all, Chinese students from China; we cannot become exactly the same as Singaporeans'.

Defining integration with such an assimilationist thrust had two implications. First, virtually all interviewees had a rather modest self-evaluation of their success at 'integration'. In fact, their elaborations of *rongru* were typically followed by or intertwined with descriptions of, and sometimes laments about, their failures in this area. During one group interview, I asked the three interviewees to each give themselves a score for their integration and they all rated themselves 30–40 out of a possible 100, indicating a 'fail'.

A second implication was that a pattern emerged among the interviewees to conceptualize 'integration' as consisting of two levels: (1) a superficial,

instrumental and/or minimal level; and (2) a genuine, deep level. Ji Qiu described the former level as 'being able to interact with locals [*neng gen tamen da jiaodao*]' and the latter as 'your personal identity, and a higher level of self-perception [*ziwo renshi*]', which is about the 'inner world' (*neixin de*). He further explained:

Regarding *rongru*, the utmost I can do is – I know their etiquettes and social norms very well; I know how to interact with them. For example, in a company [where I work], I know how to communicate effectively with them. I think this is the best degree of *rongru* I can manage to achieve.

In other words, integration at this superficial level is essentially about the minimal amount of adjustment required for successful social functioning in the host context. This could be usefully termed 'adaptation', which involves a lower level or a smaller amount of change compared with integration, let alone assimilation. Indeed, all interviewees, despite variations in the length of time spent in Singapore (ranging from one to five years), felt they had been able to adjust to living in Singapore rather well. In other words, they regarded this adaptation as the first level of their integration, which they gave themselves more credit for.

In contrast, real integration (*zhengzheng de rongru*), in the imaginations of my interviewees, referred to something transcending the practical and instrumental – it referred to something 'genuine'. As Ziyun put it, it involves the 'shrinking of the distance between people's hearts [*xinling juli de lajin*]'. Jingjing expressed more or less the same understanding when she mentioned that, although her Singaporean friends and acquaintances would talk with her, she was sure that they would never share 'really important' things with her like personal life issues. This two-tier conceptualization held by participants about 'integration' into the local sphere was perhaps most succinctly formulated in terse idiomatic terms by Linghe: 'We have enough to eat and drink; but we can't talk heart-to-heart [with locals] [*neng chibao hebao, danshi buneng tanxin*]'

While this two-tier sociocultural understanding of integration with an underlying assumption of assimilation was predominant among the interviewees, some of them also expressed slightly different, and arguably more sophisticated, interpretations of *rongru*. Chiefly, two noteworthy interpretations might respectively be termed a context-dependent understanding and a functionalist understanding.

Ziyun, for instance, spoke from his experience of taking part in UIS' debating society Toastmasters, and of attending a Christian church regularly. According to him, everybody at the UIS Toastmasters was there for a common objective – namely to improve presentation and communication skills – which meant social interactions were very positive. Moreover, integration among students of different backgrounds, be they local or international, was not a problem. This common objective, Ziyun analysed, formed the basis for integration and social bonding. It was a similar story with church attendance: as Ziyun said, 'because everybody is a Christian, everybody is nice, and our interactions are very nice too. We love one another because we are all children of God, so to speak'. (It is worth pointing out here that the church Ziyun regularly attended was a Chinese-speaking one, with a significant number of PRC immigrant attendees.)

Another example came from Xing Bing, a final-year engineering student. Xing Bing was unique in giving himself a score of 70 for his *rongru*, and he believed this was to a great extent thanks to playing basketball, a passion that he shared with some Singaporean students living in the same dormitory. He vividly described how playing a competitive team sport like basketball really helped bring him and the local team members closer to each other:

When playing basketball [...] a kind of sport involving adrenaline rush, you will feel that kind of team spirit. Say if you scored, or if your teammate scored, and you guys have a 'high-5' [...] after that, you will from the heart accept, or gradually like, this person.

(It is worth noting again, however, that Xing Bing considered basketball a very 'Chinese' sport in Singapore. Not only did the majority of players and enthusiasts seem to be ethnically Chinese, but even basketball jargons were spoken/shouted in Chinese.) Although Xing Bing was confident in his level of integration with locals, he offered me a reverse example whereby integration did not happen in a particular context, namely the academic. Speaking with a slightly humorous and dismissive tone, he said:

I've never had any experience of integrating with the locals with regard to study. They can spend twelve hours overnight working on just one tutorial, while chatting, snacking and listening to loud music. It's such a waste of time. In that regard I can never *rongru*.

Both Ziyun and Xing Bing's narratives illustrate clearly that integration could be context-dependent.

The 'functionalist' understanding of integration overlaps with this context-dependent interpretation to some extent, but the emphasis is that integration is not regarded as a priority/primary concern, but rather viewed as a by-product of successful performance or discharge of other social functions. Miao Ya was unique among the thirteen interviewees in admitting that he had not really thought much about integration, or attached any great importance to it: 'As long as you do well what you ought to do [*zuo hao ziji gai zuo de shi*] [...] as long as you fulfil your role, that's ok, you are integrating'. Miao Ya's example was his participation in UIS' Cultural Activities Club, in which he served as a sound technician; he felt his competent performance in this role has earned him acceptance from other members of the club – who are mostly locals – and he regarded this as sufficient integration.

Reasons for the lack of *rongru*

While discussing the issue of *rongru*, interviewees inevitably reflected upon the reasons behind their self-perceived lacklustre achievement in it.

Unsurprisingly, language was identified by most interviewees as a cause. Whereas this author's previous research (Yang 2016a: chapter 4) has found that language barrier in the Singaporean context did not represent as prominent a problem as it does in some other study-abroad scenarios (cf. Ryan and Twibell 2000; Brown 2008), the interviewees' predominantly sociocultural definition of integration meant that language was nevertheless a very important factor. For example, Jingjing remarked during a group interview: 'When [I'm] with friends, if they are local, they would use some Malay, or some local tongues.

Then, instantaneously, I will miss the point [of the conversation], and get left out'. This remark is representative of most interviewees' experience with the local lingua franca 'Singlish' – the uniquely Singaporean version of creolized English that liberally incorporates Malay and Chinese dialect vocabularies. Most interviewees confessed that they had some problems following Singlish conversations between Singaporeans, which limited their ability to comprehend and participate. Lengchu, a final-year engineering student, admitted that it was only during a semester-long industrial attachment (a form of work experience) earlier in the year that he picked up a couple of local slangs such as calling tea '*teh*' and coffee '*kopi*'. His Singlish, however, did not progress much beyond that.

This language barrier signifies the Chinese students' lack of certain prerequisite skills to integrate into or mingle with their local Singaporean counterparts. It also points to the lack of some common (back)ground or commonality between the two groups. This latter issue was frequently raised during the interviews. For example, because this research took place just two months after Singapore's 2015 general election, Jingjing recalled her inability to participate in any of the conversations her local course-mates were having about local politics/politicians, because she simply did not have the basic background knowledge in that area. As a result, Jingjing believed that her conversations with Singaporean peers could only remain at a 'superficial' (*fuqian/biaomian*) level, involving mundane topics such as food or common concerns in relation to the university. Peng Chun agreed that commonality – be it cultural background or life experiences – was crucial for forging connections. He illustrated this with the case of an exchange student from Korea that he had known previously as a roommate. This student was apparently able to connect well with locals because, as in Singapore, it was compulsory for Korean men to perform national military service.

Most interviewees agreed that the local students' lack of interest in or indifference towards them was another reason for the failure of integration, although they differed on how this should be interpreted. Peng Chun, for example, recalled that he was keen to make friends with local students during his first year of university by teaming up with them on school projects, but he found to his disappointment that the local students were somewhat 'cold' (*lengmo*) or 'indifferent' (*buli bucai*) towards him as an international student, showing no curiosity or desire to know more about him or his cultural background. Instead, he found interactions with other international students, such as those from Malaysia, Indonesia or India, much more positive. Ji Qiu also happened to mention that local peers seemed to have certain (negative) 'sentiments' (*qingxu*) towards him when doing school projects together. Jingjing perceived that the female Singaporean dormitory neighbours showed more interest in her Swedish exchange student roommate than in her. Linghe concurred that locals showed no particular initiative in helping Chinese students integrate. Yet, in contrast to Peng Chun or Jingjing, she believed that the locals had no duty of doing so, and the burden should be upon the guest students to try to initiate contact and integration.

In addition, three interviewees recalled experiencing hostile or discriminatory attitudes from locals, but they stressed that these were mostly not from UIS students, and were very minor incidents which were not particularly hurtful. This is counterbalanced, however, by Xing Bing's commendation of how friendly the local students he met were. He recalled that local dormitory neighbours would take the initiative to befriend him, and that the other

members of his project groups at school were extremely nice and supportive. While this seems to illustrate that open hostility towards foreigners in Singapore is rare, Huixin, the China-born but mostly Singaporean-raised interviewee, offered an alternative perspective. Because her identity was very ambivalent and she could perfectly 'pass off' as Singaporean, she had unique access to how Singaporeans talked or thought about PRC Chinese, including PRC students. According to her, local prejudice was fairly widespread, but the PRC migrant students simply had no way of knowing it.

Most interviewees recognized or pointed out that, at a more fundamental level, *rongru* failed to happen because of a lack of motivation, which was ultimately due to the lack of a real need. This was perhaps best illustrated by a revealing statement from Bangguo, a third-year engineering student and an executive committee member in the PRC Student Union (PRCSU) at UIS. In our interview, I asked about the activities of the PRCSU, specifically whether it conducted any workshops on helping PRC students integrate. Bangguo answered: 'No, because the PRCSU's activities focus on students' practical needs such as selecting majors, career path choice, job hunting and pursuing postgraduate education'. In other words, from the viewpoint of Bangguo and the PRCSU, *rongru* or integration was not really a practical need of the PRC students – at least not one that was felt urgently.

In all my interviews, I made a point to ask the interlocutors whether integration was necessary or important. The answers I got were similar in gist: it was not very necessary for them as students, though perhaps it would become important and necessary in the future, depending on situation. One straightforward reason for this lack of perceived need to integrate, as noted by most interviewees, is that there is already a substantial network, if not community, of PRC students in UIS, which more or less sufficiently caters to their social needs. As Lengchu remarked: 'Because there is a significant number of Chinese [students], even if you only socialized with other Chinese, you can still have a relatively large [social] network'. As a result, he noted: 'You will feel that the needs of everyday social life are all Ok [*chihe wanle dou keyi*], and there seems no particular need to integrate'. Because of this, integration gets deferred, becoming something that is only situationally necessary, i.e. 'only necessary if ...'. For instance, a few of my interviewees said that *if* they settled down and had children in Singapore, it would be necessary for them to really integrate into the local society. Illustrating the same logic, Linghe remarked:

When there is such a need [to integrate] when [we start] working, we will naturally do so. And [right now] we lack an opportunity. Because we don't take the initiative, they [locals] don't take the initiative to approach us either, so it [integration] becomes difficult. But, after starting to work, with more contact, perhaps it will improve.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Why was it that the PRC international students at a Singaporean university by and large expressed understandings of 'integration' with an assimilationist underlying assumption? One possible explanation resides in the etymology of the Chinese term for 'integration' – *rongru*. Although during interview questioning I always mentioned the English term 'integration', our conversations proceeded mostly with the Chinese term *rongru*. In Chinese, the character

rong – 融 – signifies an act of fusing or dissolving (the Chinese term for 'melt' is *ronghua*). *Rongru* therefore easily conjures up the image of dissolving into or melting into, i.e. becoming indistinguishable with, the receiving substance. In addition to this possible etymological explanation, one could also identify a cultural-ideological reason. Zang (2015) argues that, when it comes to interethnic relations throughout the long history of Chinese civilisation, the ideology of *minzu ronghe* (民族融和) – namely 'ethnic fusion' – has taken deep roots. In other words, the idea that different ethnic groups should merge into one for the sake of unity enjoys widespread legitimacy. The UIS PRC students' assimilationist articulations of 'integration' should be seen in view of these background factors. At the same time, this also highlights the issue of the cross-cultural translatability of certain concepts and terminologies – a methodological issue worth attention in conducting research across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Because of this culturally and linguistically inflected notion of 'integration' with an assimilationist thrust, the PRC students' self-evaluation of poor integration should not be taken at face value. The fact that they mostly defined integration in sociocultural terms, emphasizing friendship, may in fact indicate that the latter is the only area in which they have difficulties, whereas in other respects (for example, the academic and the everyday practical) there were few perceived problems.

Furthermore, a distinction should be made between discourse and actual practice. While the interviewees in this study discursively articulated particular ideal visions of successful 'integration', the latter may not necessarily be the guide for their actual everyday social practice. As noted previously, many interviewees suggested that it was either not necessary or too difficult to seek 'real integration'. Instead, securing some basic level of social support from the most readily available social networks (i.e. other PRC students or individuals in Singapore) may be a priority.

This then leads one to wonder whether or not the Chinese international students at UIS, while talking about *rongru* in fairly assimilationist terms, with the reference point being Singapore, in reality practice what may be tentatively termed 'segmented' and/or 'mediated' integration. These terms – taken from Portes and Zhou's (1993) influential theorization of second generation assimilation in the United States – can be taken to mean integration into a segment of the receiving context, or integration into the receiving context through the mediation of a segment or an intermediary network/community. This hypothesis appears to be supported by the integration experiences reported by interviewees Ziyun and Xing Bing. To recall, Ziyun reported positive integration experiences in church attendance, but revealed that the church he attended was a Chinese-speaking one, with many other believers of PRC background. Xing Bing's successful integration with local UIS dormitory neighbours, meanwhile, was not just mediated by their shared passion for basketball; the fact that the latter is apparently an ethnicized (Chinese) sport in Singapore (and thus using Mandarin as the preferred medium of communication) was probably also an important contributing factor. This hypothesis seems to warrant further investigation. With regards to Xing Bing's case, for instance, it would be interesting to ask whether any gendered difference exists regarding the avenues of integration. While this preliminary study has not identified evidence to this effect, it is certainly worth exploring in future research.

Finally, this article's exclusive focus on international students' understanding of integration may inadvertently underplay the role and responsibility of

the host in contributing to a positive experience of integration. As previous research (e.g. Berry 1997; Zhou 1997) has pointed out, integration is a two-way process, requiring the efforts of both the incomer and the receiver. In view of this, it will be useful to examine how the local host – in this case, the Singaporean students at UIS – understand or approach integration. As Leong (2014) has pointed out, much acculturation research has posited that the convergence between the dominant and non-dominant groups' acculturation orientations leads to more positive intergroup outcomes. Given this, and building on the present study, future research could further investigate how local university students in Singapore, and Singaporean society in general, understand integration/assimilation and what they expect from migrants in this regard.

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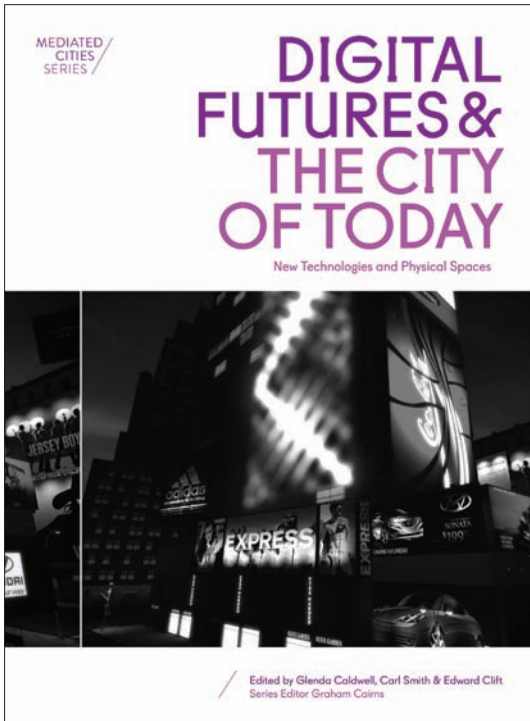
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New Technologies and Physical Spaces

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