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A Phenomenology of being “Very China”

An Ethnographic Report on the Self-Formation Experiences of Mainland Chinese Undergraduate “Foreign Talents” in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper offers an ethnographic account of the self-formation experiences of Mainland Chinese undergraduate students as “foreign talents” in a Singaporean university. While extant scholarship often points out that international educational sojourn has transformative effects on the student-sojourners, detailed empirical examination of how such transformations take place is still lacking; this paper furnishes a microscopic case study in this vein. By looking at Chinese international students in the (Southeast) Asian city-state Singapore, the paper is also an effort to offer a relatively rare glimpse into the subjective dimension of intra-Asia student mobility. Furthermore, with regard to the Singapore local context, this account seeks to throw some new light on the hotly-debated “foreign talent” issue from the perspective of the scholarship-receiving students (“scholars”). With the title being a playful riff on G.W.F. Hegel’s philosophical canon, this paper uses Hegelian notions such as self-consciousness, the “other”, desire, and negation to narrate and analyse those aspects of the Mainland Chinese scholars’ self-(trans)formative experiences revolving around the idiom of “very China”-ness.

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Keywords

Singapore – foreign talent – China – PRC scholar – international students – self-formation

Introduction: International Student Mobility and Self-Formation

As the globalisation of higher education deepens, international student mobility has become a topic increasingly widely acknowledged and studied in academic research (e.g., Brooks and Waters, 2011; Byram and Dervin, 2008). As a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, student mobility is approached in existing scholarship from a diversity of angles. At more macro levels, for instance, its implications for national and global policy-making, as well as various institutional actors are often discussed in relation to economic development and talent formation against the broad discursive background of knowledge economy (e.g., Altbach, 2003; Kemal, 2008; Olds, 2007). More relevant to the present paper, at micro levels, the subjective experiences of internationally mobile students have also begun to receive more and more scholarly attention, with the intercultural “adjustment” processes involved in international study-sojourn being one of the most prominent themes (Brown, 2008; Marginson, 2014).

Cushner and Karim (2004: 292) characterise the study-abroad experience generally as “a significant transitional event that brings with it a considerable amount of accompanying stress, involving both confrontation and adaptation to unfamiliar physical and psychological experiences and changes.” Extant literature in this vein typically emphasises the more problematic aspects of such experiences. For example, Gu and Maley (2008: 225–226) note that many researchers have variously investigated the “culture shock”, “learning/education shock”, “language shock” and “role shock”, etc., that often await international students upon their entry into unfamiliar study and living environments. The stress caused by these “shocks” and the difficulties of overcoming them are believed to underlie a widely observed lack of interaction among student groups in the increasingly multicultural campuses of Western higher education institutions (e.g., Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Holmes, 2007), sometimes leading to a phenomenon of international student “ghettoisation” (e.g., Brown and Holloway, 2008; Kim, 1988). It seems the overall picture of the international study-sojourn experience is dominated by motifs such as difference, disjuncture and difficulty (e.g., Holmes, 2004; Zhang and Brunton, 2007).

On the other hand, researchers have also, on a more positive note, pointed to the trans-/formative effects that an international educational experience can have on the student-sojourners. For instance, the experience is described by some as a process of "(inter-)cultural learning" (e.g., Alred et al., 2003; Ward et al., 2001), where the "acquisition [...] of appropriate behaviour and skills" (Brown and Holloway, 2008: 235) takes place over time, resulting in the students "becoming different, evolving a new self" (ibid.: 245). Milstein (2005) suggests that studying abroad helps the students to achieve revised self-understandings/concepts, while Murphy-Lejeune (2003: 113) characterises the experience as a "maturing process" that "takes the shape of a personal expansion, an opening of one's potential universe."

Despite such general acknowledgement of the trans-/formative effects of the international study-sojourn experience, however, there still seems to be a dearth of concrete studies examining in empirical detail *how* trans-/formation takes place in international students. Scherto Gill's (2007) observation, made a few years ago in relation to Chinese international students in the U.K., that "there has been very little research investigating the *nature* of changes occurring in Chinese students" (p. 169; emphasis added) seems to remain largely true. Taking inspiration from Gill's perceptive use of the expression *nature*, my first general aim in this paper is to offer a fine-grained, microscopic examination of the commonly claimed trans-/formative experience of international study-sojourn through an ethnographic case.

In a recent stock-taking account of existing research literature on international students' experiences, Simon Marginson (2014) points out that as a significant portion of this literature is informed by cross-cultural psychology, there has been a bias towards the "adjustment" conceptual paradigm, which tends to simplistically depict a picture of the international students "adapting" or "fitting in" to the host environment as relatively passive subjects. This paradigm, argues Marginson, unduly underplays the "active agency of international students themselves" (ibid.: 9), and could benefit from a complementary perspective that sees the international student-sojourners as actively involved in their own "self-formation". In this paper, a second general aim of mine is to illustrate through ethnographic materials how this agentic self-formation unfurls in the case of a specific group of international students. I echo Marginson's assertion that international students are "often conscious of their own changing subjectivities, working critically using feedback from themselves (and others)" (ibid.: 14); indeed, as I shall show, self-consciousness of changing subjectivities and the use of feedbacks from the self and others are central to the experiences of these students. However, I also wish to add further nuance to Marginson's advocacy for the self-forming perspective by pointing out that self-formation

is always intimately entwined with *other-formation*, i.e., being formed by and through the “other”. In the words of philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1992: 3), “... the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other.” Similarly, cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997:21) eloquently says, “Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its position through the narrow eyes of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself.” In this paper, I zoom in to look at the mechanism by which self-other relations and tensions effect self-formation.

By taking up the case of the Mainland Chinese undergraduate students as “foreign talents” in a Singaporean university, a third overall aim of this paper is to contribute towards plugging a conspicuous gap in extant research, namely, the lack of empirical studies that look at international students who sojourn to cultures and societies that are believed to be *not* drastically different from their home backgrounds. While being a highly developed and Westernised country where the language of government, business and education is English, the Southeast Asian city-state Singapore at the same time has an ethnic Chinese majority, and Chinese language and culture are integral to the sociocultural fabric of everyday life. Thus, the sociocultural gulf the Mainland Chinese students cross is arguably much narrower. Existing studies of Chinese international student-sojourners’ experiences, some of which I cited previously, nearly always originate from the Anglo-Saxon English-speaking countries, particularly North America, Europe and Oceania (see also Abelmann and Kang, 2013; Dervin, 2011; Fong, 2011; Simpson and Tan, 2009; Tian and Lowe, 2009; Waters, 2008; Zhou and Todman, 2008, 2009); arguably, there is an implicit assumption that sojourn problems and the attendant trans-/formative opportunities are prominent only when the differences between sojourning students’ home culture and host culture are prominently marked. This paper calls this implicit assumption into question and attempts to show how the unique case of China-to-Singapore student mobility also involves various challenges and opportunities with regard to intercultural self trans-/formation.

Singapore and “Foreign Talent”

Among the much larger number of international students in Singapore, the groups of Chinese students this ethnographic report specifically focuses on is a subset commonly known in local parlance as “foreign talents”. This necessitates a background discussion regarding how international student mobility in the local context is inextricably entangled with the Singapore government’s “for-

eign talent” strategies. While the nexus between international student recruitment and state policies on skilled immigration is not a phenomenon unique to Singapore (e.g., Robertson, 2011, 2013b), what is perhaps special to the Singapore case is the extent to which the often contentious social discourses about “foreign talents” of late have become the primary frames through which many in the Singapore society interpret their observations of and encounters with international students.

As the economy of post-independence (1965) Singapore grew dramatically on the basis of export-oriented manufacturing (Rodan, 1989), lifting this erstwhile colonial trading post to the status of a newly-industrialised country, from the 1980s, the Singapore state began to gradually shift its focus to developing and attracting highly skilled human capital. In 1980, two dedicated state agencies were set up with the specific task of recruiting “foreign talents” (Quah, 1984), marking the genesis of the “foreign talent” policies. Since then, but particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, “foreign talent” has become an iconic mantra and policy catchphrase that index the Singapore government’s ambitions to turn the small island-state into a human capital rich, competitive knowledge-based economy through welcoming skilled and talented foreigners. In 1997, the then Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said in that year’s National Day Rally speech, “In the information age, human talent, not physical resources of financial capital, is the key factor for economic competitiveness and success. We must therefore welcome the infusion of knowledge which foreign talent will bring” (quoted in Yeoh, 2013: 103).

The “foreign talent” policy in Singapore is not only seen as desirable in response to the arrival of the world knowledge economy, it is also spoken of in the official rhetoric as an imperative for national survival, given that the island-state has virtually no natural resources to rely on and had begun to face problems that trouble many other industrialised nations, such as declining fertility rates (Sun, 2011) and emigration (Tan, 2005), to which the importation of “foreign talents” is believed to be a solution (Low, 2002).

Under such circumstances, the Singapore state proactively pursued various policy measures in order to make the city-state a place welcome to high-skilled immigrants. As various scholars have noted (e.g., Wong, 1997; Yeoh, 2006; Yeoh and Huang, 1999), immigration and foreign manpower management in Singapore exhibits a “bifurcated” character, whereby those foreigners deemed to be “talented” are met with smooth immigration procedures and liberal naturalisation policies, whereas the semi- or low-skilled are subjected to a highly regulated transient status (Yeoh, 2004).

Education, in particular, has been an arena in which the Singapore state vigorously participates in the “global war for talent” (Ng, 2011), because attract-

ing, nurturing and retaining international students are believed to be pursuant to the state's vision of making Singapore a creative knowledge hub. In early 2000s, for instance, the "Global Schoolhouse" project (Ng and Tan, 2010; Olds, 2007) was officially launched with the ambitious objective of attracting a critical mass of up to 150,000 foreign students to study in Singapore at all levels of public or private educational establishments. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, nearly 100,000 foreign students were studying in the city-state (*The Straits Times*, 11 November 2010). International educational mobility in Singapore is thus closely bound up with the "foreign talent" strategic imperative, even though strictly speaking there is only a partial overlap between the categories of international student and "foreign talents".

The types of Chinese students that I examine in this paper, however, are indeed the direct consequences of the "foreign talent" policies. Beginning in the 1990s, various kinds of scholarship schemes were put in place by the Singapore government with a view of recruiting high-calibre students from the surrounding region to study in local secondary and tertiary institutions (see also Koh, 2012). These scholarships are typically initiated and monitored by the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE), indirectly funded by the state through government-linked corporations, and executed and managed by the local receiving educational institutions themselves. True to the rationale of the "foreign talent" policies, scholarships normally carry "service bonds" which require recipients to stay and work in Singapore, typically for three or six years after university graduation. "Scholars" are recruited from India, various ASEAN nations, but most notably, from the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was reported in 2012 (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 9 March 2012) that, in recent years, the Singapore government granted more than 1,000 full scholarships to foreign students at the undergraduate level per year. While no nationality-specific breakdown figures are available, based on information I gathered during the fieldwork, which I outline in the next section, there can be little doubt that the majority of Singapore's "foreign talent" scholarships go to the PRC students.

PRC "Foreign Talent" Scholars: The SM₁/2/3 Schemes

There are three long-running systematic government scholarship schemes in Singapore that specifically target students from China, known respectively as the SM₁, SM₂ and SM₃ schemes, wherein SM stands for "senior middle (school)".

SM1

Established in the mid-1990s, the SM1 scheme offers full funding to support students who are about to start senior middle school (the 10th to 12th formal schooling year in the Chinese system) grade one in China to come to Singapore instead, commencing study from secondary three and up to the end of the A Level exams. Approximately 30 local secondary schools participate in the SM1 programme, and each recruits between several and a few dozen students every year from their feeder schools—typically top junior middle schools (the 7th to 9th formal schooling year) in various Chinese areas—after conducting written exams and interviews in China. SM1 scholars are not bound by any service obligation, and are free to pursue university education anywhere they choose afterwards. While no statistics are available, my fieldwork suggests that a notable number of SM1 scholars move on to study in universities in Western English-speaking countries, while the rest continue tertiary education in Singapore.

SM2 and SM3

Both SM2 and SM3 are undergraduate level scholarships. The SM2 scholarships are awarded to senior middle school grade two students typically in the top schools in more than a dozen Chinese provinces spanning from Heilongjiang in the north to Guangdong in the south. SM3 scholars, on the other hand, are recruited from among the first year students in more than a dozen top or highly-ranked Chinese universities. In both cases, the scholars are selected by Singapore MOE officials who travel to various Chinese provinces or institutions to conduct written exams and interviews.

Upon arrival in Singapore, SM2 scholars typically undergo an 18-month “bridging course” before matriculation whereas the SM3 undergo a 6-month course. The SM2 scheme started in 1997, and the annual intake had increased from below 200 in the earlier years to nearly 400 students in more recent years. SM3 was initiated in 1992 and concluded after the 20th and final batch of students was recruited in 2011; over the years, the SM3 had a more or less similar intake scale as SM2. Both SM2 and SM3 schemes guarantee the scholarship recipients university admissions (to two of the older universities in Singapore), cover all tuition fees, and provide a modest living stipend. In contrast to the bond-free SM1, these two schemes require the scholars to specialise in engineering and science disciplines at university, in addition to a legal bond requiring them to work in Singapore for a total of six years upon their university graduation. Since their inceptions, it could be estimated that the SM2 and SM3 schemes together have brought about 15,000 PRC students into Singapore.

Fieldwork

This paper is informed by an ethnographic research project examining the Chinese “foreign talent” scholars in Singapore, which involved a 16-month double-sited fieldwork, with four months spent in China and 12 months in Singapore. For the Singapore part, I was based primarily at a local university, which I pseudonymously call the “University Institute Singapore (UIS)” — an English-medium, globally-oriented comprehensive university ranked among the top-100 world universities according to the Times Higher Education league table. Adopting an anthropological mode of inquiry, I interacted with up to 200 PRC scholars at various life-stages, ranging from the pre-university to those who were a few years into professional life. I further carried out in-depth recorded interviews with a total of 49 SM1/2/3 PRC scholar informants, 29 of whom were at that time undergraduate students at UIS. Most interviews were one-to-one, sometimes with follow-ups, while a small number were group-based; typical interviews lasted 90 minutes, but many were longer; all interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and transcribed as such before they were translated into English.

Local Response to the PRC “Foreign Talents”

In relation to “foreign talent”, it is important to note that the Singapore state’s successful implementation of such policies is not unaccompanied by certain controversial social repercussions. In the past decade, as the continuous influx of foreigners brought about issues such as overcrowding and fierce competitions in the education and job markets, strident dissenting voices have been and are still being heard in Singapore (Koh, 2003; Yang, 2014 forthcoming). In both, the 2011 General Election and the 2012 Presidential Election, Singapore’s reigning People’s Action Party (PAP) faced unprecedented challenges from oppositional political parties and criticisms from the general public, wherein one of the key issues of contention has been the significant presence of foreigners—whether “talent” or not—in the densely populated city-state.

At more mundane levels, sentiments of resentment or xenophobia became more perceptible in society (Gomes, 2014), with Mainland Chinese immigrants—the largest nationality group of immigrants in Singapore—becoming the focus of contention (Yeoh and Lin, 2013). Specifically in relation to PRC “foreign talent” scholars, because they are seen to be showered with privileges, there is often additional public scrutiny over their everyday conduct and fulfilment of moral and legal obligations. Increasingly, a suspicion developed among many Singaporeans about the academic quality and/or moral integrity of the PRC scholars, exacerbated by several recent high-profile cases of anti-social verbal

abuse involving Chinese students/scholars and their alleged “bond-breaking” behaviour whereby they failed to perform the scholarship obligations (Yeoh and Lin, 2013). In the context of the multicultural university campuses in Singapore, differences in cultural and educational backgrounds continue to trouble the amicable interactions between the PRC scholars and their local Singaporean hosts (Yang, under review), and this is where this paper seeks to make an investigation, if not an intervention.

Yeoh and Lin (2013: 48, emphasis added) concluded their recent discussion of Chinese Singaporeans’ troubled accommodation of new Mainland Chinese immigrants by remarking “... it seems unlikely that the two ‘factions’ of ‘Chinese’ would see *eye to eye* any time soon.” While this might also be said of the case of PRC undergraduate “foreign talents” in Singapore’s university campuses, in this paper, I wish to show that although seeing “eye to eye” with the “other” might be a difficult and unsettling experience, it could also present valuable opportunities for self-transformation. By thus attempting to highlight the generative and transformative potentials in a self-other relationship, I offer to cast some optimistic light upon the “foreign talent”-related debates in Singapore, which so far seem to be overwhelmingly framed as a negative issue of self-other divide and enmity.

Notes on Analytical Scope and Theoretical Approach

Deeply multicultural and cosmopolitan, Singapore’s university campuses are “contact zones” (Kenway and Bullen, 2010; Yeoh and Willis, 2005) in which the international students encounter multifarious challenges and opportunities for learning—academically, socially, culturally, existentially and otherwise. Consequently, the PRC “foreign talent” undergraduates’ experiences in UIS, as I discovered in fieldwork, were unsurprisingly diverse and multifaceted. In this paper, the scope of my presentation of ethnographic data and analysis is restricted to one dimension of the transformative experiences shared by many—though not all and everyone—of my PRC scholar informants with regard to their self-perceived “very China” identity traits that are heightened by virtue of their mundane encounters with their local Singaporean counterparts. In other words, central to the process of self-formation that I investigate here are the notions of otherness, self-consciousness, self-transformation and their interrelationship.

Regarding this interrelationship, I find German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel’s (1998) certain philosophical ideas relevant. As explicated by Judith Butler (1987), in the Hegelian scheme, the abstract philosophical subject journeys

from the most restricted and alienated form of consciousness to “Absolute Knowing”, wherein this subject finally attains an all-encompassing universality of mind. Initially alienated and partial, the subject experiences difference as *otherness*, by encountering which it gains self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, in turn, is “desire in general” (Hegel, 1998: 105); in other words, by becoming self-conscious, the subject implicitly desires the “other”, and the “other” is that which incites the self-consciousness of the subject in the first place. As Butler explains, desire is “... the subject’s relationship to that which is not itself, that which is different, strange, novel” (Butler, 1987: 9), and “... the satisfaction of desire is the *transformation of difference into identity*” (ibid., emphasis added). (Importantly, here this *identity* is what Paul Ricoeur (1992: 3) calls “*idem-identity*” or sameness, as opposed to “*ipse-identity*” that is more akin to how the term is used in common parlance.) Put otherwise, the mechanism is that the self-conscious subject desires the “other”, seeks to incorporate the “other” into itself (or modify itself in reference to the “other”), thereby evolving into an expanded and superior subjectivity that overcame the otherness of the “other”, as well as the alienated and partial previous self.

Hegel is an incredibly abstruse philosopher whom perhaps few can claim to truly understand. My purpose here of sketching my reading—possibly misreading—of these Hegelian thoughts in their skeletal forms is not to claim comprehension of or declare allegiance to Hegelianism, but merely to acknowledge the fact that observing the PRC scholars’ self-transformation and listening to their own narratives about such an experience often somehow reminded me of these abstract philosophical insights. I see these abstract insights as offering one interpretive model that helps make sense and elucidate the empirical material that I shall present. At the same time, being sceptical of the possibility of truly pre-theoretical “grounded” analysis, I also acknowledge that my ethnographic approach in this paper is more in line with what Paul Willis puts forward in *The Ethnographic Imagination* (Willis, 2000), which emphasises the value of putting ethnographic data “into forcible contact with outside concepts” (p. xi). Being “*foreign talents*”, otherness is encoded in the PRC scholars’ subjectivity and experiences; conversely, from the perspective of these students themselves, they encounter their local Singaporean host as an “other” figure too. In this self-other encounter, self-consciousness, desire, and negation seem to be the key components or moments in the PRC scholars’ self-formation process, as I now turn to illustrate in the following ethnographic report.

Ethnographic Report: A Phenomenology of being “Very China”

“Very China” 101

As the presence of foreign students increased dramatically in the university campuses of Singapore from mid-2000s, causing disquiet to arise from among the local students, rules have been instituted more recently to cap the numbers of foreign undergraduates at 20% of each year cohort. In spite of this, the impression that one gets on the ground is as if the percentages could be much higher. Take a random tour in the UIS libraries during exam revision period, one is likely to see the study spaces occupied by groups of PRC students “mugging” (a Singaporean slang term for cramming) over thick piles of lecture notes, with conversations spoken in the Mainland Chinese style Mandarin not far out of one’s earshot. During the vacations, when local students have mostly left campus residence, a handful of canteens with authentic Chinese cuisines—operated by caterers from China—will be visited almost exclusively by gangs of PRC students, creating the illusion that these might as well be university canteens in China.

Although official statistics are unavailable, due presumably to the sensitivity of the matter, at the undergraduate level, PRC students probably make up the largest group of foreign students at UIS (and in Singapore generally). At the postgraduate level, it could be surmised with some confidence that those from China account for more than 40% of all research students, because in 2012 a rule was internally promulgated in UIS to require all academic faculties not to award more than 40% of their Ph.D. studentships to candidates “from any single country”. Some of my informants who were UIS Ph.D. students told me that the *lingua franca* in some science/engineering labs had become Mandarin because many academic faculty members and most research students are from China.

The PRC scholars’ presence is felt as much because of their pervasiveness as because of their “differences”. There are perhaps two notable stereotypes associated with the PRC students in the UIS campus; and, as is often with stereotypes, there is a ring of truth to them.

The first, as already alluded to, consists in the PRC scholars’ studiousness and, relatedly, their perceived unsociability. PRC scholars easily stand out as the single largest group of swots in the university. Speaking of this subject, one of my field informants directed me to a short Youtube video clip apparently recorded by a Singaporean UIS student. The video clip showed a big crowd waiting in front of the university’s central library before it opened at 8.30 in the morning. The videographer was recorded commenting in a typical Singlish accent: “Aiya, must be those China scholar lah! No life one!” Indeed,

being the successful products of their home-country education system, the PRC scholars on the whole embody highly conscientious attitudes towards bookish study and remarkable levels of self-discipline. The academic pressures they thus exert on the local students—though this is one of the declared reasons why the Singapore government desires “foreign talent” students in the first place—make the former’s swotting behaviour generally unwelcome to the latter.

Aside from being library desk hoppers, PRC students are also stereotypically identified in the campus by their ways of dress/fashion. At the risk of generalisation and barring increasing individual variations, many PRC students can be marked out by their apparent insistence on their Chinese fashion codes. Boys who have arrived not for long, for example, are often seen wearing baggy T-shirts and tracksuits—the latter a common type of school uniform in China. Those who have been in Singapore for longer may have abandoned the tracksuit, but a perpetual pair of sports trainers, worn on most occasions, easily betrays their identity again, especially when the trainers are of a nondescript Chinese brand. Juxtaposed with their generally speaking more fashion-conscious local peers, the PRC students’ relatively untrendy (or “alternatively trendy”) appearances sometimes draw the judging eyes of the local students; as some of my PRC scholar informants would self-consciously say, their styles were kind of “*tu*” (literally “earthy”).

International students’ experiences often involve an embodied dimension (Collins, 2010), because embodiments are the subtle traces indexing more deeply-seated social and cultural subjectivities that sojourners travel with. Indeed, “The body [...] is a surface of social and cultural inscription; it houses subjectivity” (Longhurst, 2005: 52). Some—though surely not all—PRC scholars’ initially “*tu*” appearances could be seen as the embodied markers of their lingering belonging, if not attachment, to specific sociocultural or political regimes of subjectification that moulded them into specific types of young persons. The widespread use of tracksuit-style uniforms in Chinese schools (together with the preference for boys to wear plain baggy T-shirts and sports trainers and for girls to wear “cute” or “beautiful” but never those “sexy” clothes that their female Singaporean counterparts are more likely to wear) bespeaks an ideal construction of the student figure in China as a sporty, energetic, and above all “healthy” (*jiankang xiangshang*) youth with no frivolous vanity or craving for individualistic or morally questionable fashion statements. (It must be noted, however, as China becomes increasingly affluent and globalised in consumer culture, these stereotypes, which applied relatively readily to PRC scholars of the earlier years, e.g., late 1990s and early 2000s, became less and less sustainable in more recent times.)

In any case, when some of my PRC scholar informants—typically the ones who had been in Singapore for some time already—admitted in a tone of relaxed self-mockery that they used to wear “earthy” Chinese branded trainers and tracksuits, and/or to have exhibited some of the stereotypical features that had usually been attributed to them, I saw it not as a case of them legitimising externally-imposed discriminatory discourses, but instead as a case of their own re-evaluation of the subjectivities they believed they used to embody. This re-evaluation is succinctly captured in the expression of “very China” or “*hen zhongguo*”, as a number of my informants put it; while not everybody used exactly such an expression, many informants shared more or less a vague sentiment to this effect.

In turn, the “very China” embodied appearances metonymise a broader ranger of social or behavioural manifestations of perceived “very China” subjectivities. This metonymic connection was revealed in the following quote from a 26-year-old male ex-SM3 scholar, Da Wei (pseudonym), who had graduated three years before and was working for a European company at the time of our interview:

At that time I was really *very China* (*hen zhongguo*)! Now I look back at the photos taken at that time, I dressed just like peasants (*nongmin*)! It's so *tu*. No wonder Singaporeans laughed at us [chuckles], 'cause even I would laugh at myself! I guess we also behaved a bit like peasants, you know, speak very loudly, bad social manners and all ...

Indeed, anything ranging from “bad” sartorial sense to clumsy Chinese-accented English to the lack of polish in social manners could be reflected upon by the Chinese scholars in retrospect as “very China”-ness. Here, it is important to note how this discourse of “very China”-ness arises at the ambiguous juncture between an arguably insulting stereotypical imposition from the “other” and a self-conscious, if not self-chastising, moment of embarrassment. The two following small vignettes told by two of my informants illustrate respectively these two aspects of the discourse.

Shuyi (pseudonym, 25 years old), a female SM3 scholar who had graduated a year prior to the time of interview, vividly recalled an episode during her final year: At a career workshop on impression management conducted in a huge lecture hall attended by several hundred graduating students, including Shuyi herself, the female Singaporean public relations guru conducting that workshop at one point commented on “my friends from *China* who suck their fingers when eating crabs”, and used that as an example of disastrous impression management. Shuyi recalled how when she first heard this comment she frowned

and got upset, especially at the way in which the guru stressed the word “China” with disdain. When the workshop was over, she joined her Chinese friends who were also attending the workshop in complaining among themselves about that guru’s insensitive remark.

Fu Di (pseudonym, 24 years old), a male SM1 scholar in the fourth and final year of his degree, had a story with a different gist to tell. During the campus recruitment talk hosted by a major American bank that Fu Di had attended not long ago, he was amazed at how a PRC student sitting in the front row surprised the crowd by asking: “So how much is the salary?” first thing in the Q&A session. This obviously caused a wave of laughter across the large lecture hall in which the talk was held, and induced quite a few giggles from the senior American bankers at the podium. Fu Di cited this little vignette with such animated disapproval as if that embarrassing moment indexing Chinese students’ lack of tact in communication had been his own.

Such “very China” moments described by some of my informants may seem rather trivial to the disciplined eyes and trained minds of the social scientists at first, but I argue these ethnographic instances are manifestations of something theoretically more significant. Namely, they are the moments of *self-consciousness*—moments in which the subject becomes aware of itself through being *reflected* by/in the “other”. Such reflection may start with the unjustified stereotyping imposed by an “other” or a self-initiated comparison with the “other”, or anything in between; but regardless, the result is a heightened sense of self-awareness. It may be quipped that people from China are naturally “very China” because that’s the culture and environment they have come from; however, it is when immersed in a different sociocultural setting by virtue of their educational mobility, and thereby having encountered *otherness*, for some PRC scholars, a self-consciousness emerged in the form of a realisation of their being “very China”.

Recalling the Hegelian idea that “self-consciousness is desire in general”, the development of such a self-consciousness of being “very China” may be regarded as a *desire* shared by many of my PRC scholar informants. And as the Hegelian formulation has it, this desire, first excited by the encounter with otherness, finds its ultimate satisfaction in the negation of otherness, in the transformation of difference into identity (or sameness). This is borne out in concrete terms by the ways in which, for some of my informants, the negation of their “very China”-ness and therefore the achievement of identity with the “other” was sometimes spoken of as a desirable aim or celebrated outcome of their personal journeys. I met a number of informants who seemed to take being mistaken as Singaporean or not being recognised as hailing from the PRC as compliments; but the informant who most explicitly instantiated this was

perhaps Tong Mei (pseudonym), a 26-year-old female SM2 scholar who had graduated and been working for two years at the time of our interview; she remarked, intoning a sense of achievement:

In these few years of working life, people around me gave me the evaluation (*pingjia*) that I am not like a Mainland Chinese at all (*genben buxiang zhongguoren*). My English has improved a lot, and people actually can't tell where I am from. Sometimes they mistake me for a Singaporean (*shuo wo shibushi xinjiapo ren a?*).

When I brought up this self-perception of being “very China” that was more strongly voiced by some of my informants to a wider range of interviewees, most of them agreed, although there was no consensus as to what substantive elements “very China”-ness involved. Some would vaguely say not being open-minded enough was a “very China” trait, while others were more specific—for example, a male informant once mentioned that being too nationalistic and Sino-centric was something that he retrospectively regarded as “very China”. Still others referred to completely different and mundane matters such as fashion sense, personal hygiene habits, and ways of carrying or conducting oneself in general. Thus, being “very China” was “a kind of air” (*yizhong ganjue*), as one informant put it, that was not necessarily understood in the same way by different informants; but what seemed to be the common logic underlying this discourse is the sense of an old self being overcome by a new and more desirable one. “Very China” or *hen zhongguo* was the expression used by some of my informants but not others, but as an emic idiom capturing the sense of self-(trans)formation, it resonated with a greater number of my informants. As I show below, this idiom seemed to be a convenient device through which other informants in UIS narrated and made sense of their self-formation experiences in relation to other matters. And I, the ethnographer-analyst, appropriate the “very China” idiom etically to elucidate such experiences.

Critical Self-Consciousness through “Very China”-ness

Aspects such as manner, speech, gait, and fashion sense belong to the most superficial level on which the PRC scholars re-discover themselves through being reflected by otherness. As the scholars' engagement with the locality deepens, more *educative* forms of *critical* self-consciousness and desiring of otherness emerge around the “very China” idiom. In this process, one instrumental figure of otherness is that of the local Singaporean student.

The typical local Singaporean student at UIS, in the initially (also) stereotyping eyes of the PRC scholars, is someone who is not very academically oriented,

who tends to dedicate quite a portion of his university timetable to what the PRC scholars dismiss as “meaningless” extra-curricular activities (ECA) or resident hall sports/games and whatnot, and who tends to finish course assignments at the last minute and complains endlessly about exams (Yang, under review). One informant, Meng Yu (pseudonym, 19 years old), a male SM2 scholar in his second year studying Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE), bluntly remarked during our interview: “The first thing about local (students) that shocked me was how bad their mathematics were! For me, it’s quite unimaginably bad.”

Such belittling comments on local students based on exam-oriented academic aptitudes were often exchanged among the UIS PRC scholar-freshers, though few initially seemed to realise a simple fact, namely, that they actually enjoyed a considerable advantage over the engineering-major local peer students at UIS because they were selected by the Singapore MOE through “foreign talent” tests that specifically emphasised mathematics and science. Despite the fact that such comments might have been casual remarks with no hurtful intentions, when slipped into the wrong ears, they could become a source of considerable tension between the PRC scholars and the locals. In my fieldwork, I once overheard a Singaporean male student making very unkind remarks about a PRC scholar apparently because the latter had walked out of the exam hall declaring an apparently tough exam paper to be a piece of cake.

However, this kind of naïve hubris on the part of some PRC scholars is typically short-lived. In fact, quite a number of my informants told me about what they thought they had learnt from the Singaporean students based on their observations of and interactions with them. Many PRC scholars in UIS came to acknowledge that although academically they might be way ahead of the average local students, contrasting themselves with the locals also brought into relief what was lacking in themselves. There was a Lacanian sense in which some PRC scholars saw the “other” figure as a mirror that reflected their own “lacking” (Homer, 2005). In this move, the PRC scholar who looks into the “mirror” becomes a subject of lacking/desire—desiring the “other”—and simultaneously the object of his/her own criticism.

Mainstream Chinese schooling is widely criticised for being exam-driven and for thus inculcating a system of value and a concept of self-worth based largely on exam performances and paper qualifications (Kipnis, 2011; Yu and Suen, 2005). Yoked with immense pressures to do well in exams and the parental “wishing for dragon children” (Wu and Singh, 2004), students in China are often given little time and few opportunities to freely explore their non-academic passions and interests in life. Many become pragmatists or utilitari-

anists who care not so much what they do as how well they do what they are given to do. What emerged from my observation is that such insights were often the ones that PRC scholars become critically “awakened” to sooner or later, by virtue of their encounter and interaction with the Singaporean “other”. This self-critique, in turn, implies a desire to transcend their “very China” subjectivities.

Using the example of a Singaporean acquaintance who was a member in a Chinese music-related ECA club (*huayue tuan*) in UIS, one second-year SM2 scholar, Han (pseudonym, male, 19 years old, bioengineering major), articulated this movement of simultaneous self-critique and “other”-desiring in perhaps its strongest form:

In China, we practice a musical instrument, and take exams to pass grades, don't we? We want to get Grade Ten (*shiji*—the highest grade), and get a certificate, and feel good about it. The local Singaporean music lovers don't care about qualifications at all, but their skills are much better than ours. They will get you Grade 15 or 20 in China, but they don't care!

I know one Singaporean guy, he loves playing *guzheng*, but I mean he loves it *genuinely*! I've never met anyone who loves an instrument so much, so *genuinely*! I really respect him. His GPA (grade point average) is rubbish, only one point something ... not even two! He suspended his studies last year, but he doesn't really care! He spent his time playing *guzheng*, and has performed a lot in public concerts. This is called true passion! Many local students know what they enjoy, and they do it for that enjoyment.

Do we PRC students really know what we *genuinely* love? I don't think so ... We are just there for the scores, or titles: First Class honours, GPA 5.0, etc. ... Our education has taught us to be very utilitarian (*gongli*)! Sometimes I actually wish I could be truly passionate about something like that local guy, but that's not in our blood (*guzili meiyou*), I don't think I can break free from our mode of thinking ...

Here, whether the Singaporean students indeed embody a non-utilitarian attitude to education or whether the exaggerating tones employed by Han might be fully justified is less important than the striking way in which he passionately criticised himself, and other PRC scholars, via the device of the “other” figure. The Singaporean acquaintance Han spoke of might well be an exceptional case even among Singaporeans, but it was interesting to see how Han interpreted his observation of this local “other” through the categories of nationality and nationally-conditioned sociocultural and educational subjectivities.

In fact, discourses of self-criticism as they emerged among some of my informants went beyond the academic realm. One of the subtle if somewhat disturbing changes that had occurred in recent times at UIS concerning the ideal of the university campus as a multicultural “contact zone” involved the increasing presence of PRC students in the ECA organisations and some incipient patterns of segregation. Having gradually bought into the idea that attending university is not just—or not *really*—about pure academic study, the PRC scholars of more recent years have become notably more socially ambitious and active compared to their predecessors in the earlier scholarship cohorts. By the time of my fieldwork in UIS during academic year 2011–2012, executive committees (“ex-co”) of several newly set-up university-level ECA clubs and societies comprised mostly of PRC students. On the other hand, a number of typically sports-related university-level clubs remain dominated by Singaporeans, whereas the Junior Common Room Committees (JCRCs) of the more than a dozen campus residential halls are nearly the exclusive domain of the local students.

Because PRC students naturally find it more comfortable to work with other PRC students, in the recruitment of new cadres and members for ECA clubs and societies, leaders (known in Singapore university lingo as Main Committee Members, or “main comms”) who are from China tend to favour other PRC students for cadre positions (known as “sub comms”). According to some of my more cynical informants, *guanxi*—the Chinese term for the practice of favouritism based on personal connections and instrumental exchanges—allegedly becomes a feature of the ECA organisations dominated by PRC student. Because, up to the time of my fieldwork, the points a student earned through ECA participation still affected their chances of getting a campus accommodation of choice, there was indeed a “favour” to be spoken of. In an article reflecting on Singapore society’s anxieties over “foreign talents”, Aaron Koh (2003: 244) pointed out how it was perceived, if not also feared, that “foreign talents” possessed the “hegemonic potential to define their cultural space and positioning in the terrain of Singapore’s ethnoscapae.” In the microcosmic space of the UIS campus, these Chinese student-dominated ECA organisations—few as they might be in number—arguably conjure up this anxiety over the hegemonic potentials of the PRC “foreign talents”; but it must be pointed out that this phenomenon could alternatively be interpreted as these international students’ agentic act of claiming and creating spaces of their own amidst real or perceived marginalisation and exclusion (cf. Robertson, 2013a). Because of cultural and language barriers, PRC students typically find it hard, or at least it requires considerably more effort, to “break” into ECA organisations and activities dominated by Singaporean students (Yang, under

review). Yet, on the other hand, the desire to create a “well-rounded” personal biography—as reflected in a CV with not just a high GPA score, but also various ECA achievements—is increasingly felt among them; thus, creating or concentrating in ECA organisations where they make up the majority emerges as a solution.

This “arrival” of the PRC students on UIS’s ECA scene in an incipiently segregated way is interpreted by some of my informants through the lens of “very China”-ness. Chinese student ECA cadres who got their positions because of their friendship with the leaders of the ECA organisation call themselves “*hun-fen de*”, meaning a half-hearted ECA cadre whose main motive is to bag a few ECA points instead of doing serious work. Although it was not feasible for me to study any PRC students’ ECA organisations in UIS during my fieldwork, some informants commented that “China-style” (*zhongguoshi de*) student organisational politics—whatever that might mean—could take place in such organisations. In any case, due also to language barrier and cultural discomfort, Singaporean and other international students in UIS tend to avoid joining these PRC-dominated ECA clubs and societies, furthering the awkward ethnic/cultural self-sorting. Even those PRC scholars who were themselves in such ECA organisations claimed that they regretted such a fact because they believed that ECAs should be about bridging cultures and forging communication. Ironically, in reality they could not deny that it was simply more comfortable to “play with one’s own kind” (*he zijiren wan’r*).

Regarding these, one informant, a second year SM2 scholar, Yin Le (pseudonym, 19 years old, female), who used to be very active in the ECAs during her previous academic year, made the following remarks:

You see, every ECA club now in UIS is full of PRC students. But PRC students join ECA clubs for the wrong reasons. They join for two reasons: to earn the ECA points so that you get to live in halls, and to have some shining titles to put on your CV. Like, “I’m the President of blah blah Club, or the VP [vice president—author] of whatever Society ...” Sounds good right? But I think the local students are really doing the activities for the sake of fun and the benefit of the members. That’s why they can get very “high” in doing these activities. They *enjoy* the ECAs. For PRC students, we can get the positions and get the jobs done, but we are not really enjoying, ‘cause we have ulterior motives (*mudi buchun*).

To Yin Le, Chinese scholars’ utilitarian attitude towards ECA activities and their “passion”-less excellence in doing them is another “very China” trait. By contrasting this with the local Singaporean students’ (perceived) genuineness,

passion and proper motives in ECA participation, Yin Le's self-criticism, just like Han's which I quoted earlier, suggests a latent desire to transcend "very China"-ness and to incorporate into themselves the strengths they saw in the "other".

As these instances from both the academic and extra-curricular aspects of UTS campus life illustrate, the role played by the local Singaporean student figure in PRC scholars' development of critical self-consciousness is often key. Their perceptions of the local "other" seem to shift from a narrow focus on the latter's relative academic weakness to a broader vision inclusive of those other characteristics, whether justifiably attributed to the "other" or not, that the PRC scholars found commendable and useful in highlighting their own shortcomings. This shift, arguably, could be interpreted as a process of subjective expansion whereby the PRC scholars' former value system which places a premium on academic competence is replaced or, at least, complemented or complicated by a wider range of parameters for judging the other's as well as the self's social worth and desirability.

"Very China"-ness among the PRC Scholars Themselves

Another point that I found interesting during the fieldwork was that the "very China"-themed psychosocial process of critiquing and othering was not just played out between the PRC scholars and the local/Singaporean "other"; in the ways of what Nancy Abelmann (2009) aptly calls "intra-ethnic othering", the "very China" drama was sometimes also enacted among the three sub-types of PRC scholars—the SM1/2/3—themselves.

As a rule, the SM3 scholars were generally considered to be "more China" than the SM2, and both groups were to some extent aware of a subtle identity differentiation between them. Two major differences between the SM2 and SM3 help explain this divide. Firstly, because SM2 scholars are recruited to Singapore at senior middle school grade two, they have managed to avoid taking China's notoriously competitive National College Entrance Exam, or *Gaokao*; in contrast, virtually all SM3 scholars are *Gaokao* survivors, except for the very few who had been granted direct university admission in China (known as *baosong*). Secondly, when it comes to socioeconomic background, the SM2 scholars, by virtue of being recruited mostly from China's provincial capital cities, tend to originate from a relatively homogenous urban middle-class social stratum; the SM3 scholars, on the other hand, hail from a wider spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds because they are selected from the Chinese universities where they enrolled, which were not necessarily in their places of origin. Although it was not possible to obtain any meaningful statistics, fieldwork convinced me that the great majority of SM2 scholars' parents were urban middle-class pro-

professionals, such as college teachers, doctors and government officials; whereas this is notably less the case for the SM3 scholars.

Hence, when it came to “very China”-ness, SM3 scholars were typically believed to exhibit more such traits than their SM2 peers did—a fact some of my SM2 informants did not easily let go of in order to subject their SM3 peers to tongue-in-cheek mockery. Among a small group of year-two SM2 scholars with whom I chatted casually, everyone assured me: “We can tell that someone is an SM3 by just one glance!” When I asked as to how, one young man among them pointed to what he called—in jest I was quite sure—the SM3 scholars’ “time-beaten-ness” (*cangsang gan*) due to having gone through the *Gaokao* ordeal. One of this group of SM2 informants told me that he had not so far even exchanged a single word with the SM3 scholars in his course, because “These SM3 give you the impression that when you talk to them you’re wasting a few precious seconds that they could otherwise spend on reading lecture notes.” Later on, in a one-to-one interview, this SM2 interviewee talked somewhat proudly about his friendship with local Singaporeans, evidenced by his having been invited to join them in a leisure trip to Malaysia. “Many SM3 students get through four years of university without making a single local friend; that’s not my way of life,” he added.

Despite these SM2 informants’ conscious or subconscious effort to set themselves apart from the “more China” SM3 scholars, in the eyes of the handful of SM1 scholars I talked to, however, SM2 and SM3 were largely of the same hue, again defined in terms of “very China”-ness in some sense. SM1 scholars normally come to Singapore around the age of 15, and study in local secondary schools through to Junior Colleges before university matriculation. By the time they reached university, many already sport a “Singlish” accent with minimal distinctions from the Singaporeans in addition to being more in line with the local cultural sensibilities and lifestyles. When asked, one male SM1 interviewee in his final year, Fu Di (pseudonym, 24 years old), told me that he thought the difference between SM1 and SM2/3 was an “ideological” (*yishi xingtai*) one. He explained to me in the following terms:

It’s about worldviews and philosophies of life, I guess. The SM2 and SM3 are relatively rigid (*bijiao siban*) in their mind, and are too fixated on exam results. They don’t seem to socialise very much—some of them get through undergrad without making friends outside their small PRC circles. [...] They study very hard, but I don’t think they ever asked themselves *why* they study. [...] They don’t seem to have very clear visions of their own—that’s why they flock to apply to the banks when graduate; quite a lot also stay on to study for their Ph.D., not because they have pas-

sion for research, but because they don't know what else to do. They just apply to the most prestigious universities to study for their Ph.D., because that's what they've been told to do all their lives. They are still caught in a "very China" mode of thinking (*hen zhongguo de siwei moshi*).

These impressions about SM_{2/3} scholars held by SM₁ scholar Fu Di perhaps also contained some stereotypical truths. But the crucial point I wish to make here is something else: SM₁ scholars, like informant Fu Di, might have assumed the SM_{2/3} scholars to be un-self-consciously "very China", whereas in fact, as I have shown previously, this "very China"-ness is exactly that which SM_{2/3} scholars themselves sooner or later become aware of and struggle with in one way or another. In this specific case, the "very China"-ness signified particular sets of education-oriented attitudes of the Chinese students that are believed to be utilitarian or instrumentalist; but, as an *abstract idiom*, what "very China"-ness essentially signifies is the undesirability of certain self-perceived subjectivities or identity characteristics. Self-formation in the process of international study-sojourn commonly involves the subjects negating what were believed to be old undesirable or less desirable selves and transforming into what are believed to be more "mature" and more well-rounded selves; this is perhaps the reason why even though "very China"-ness was never a very concrete or precise discourse, it managed to emerge in exactly those words from the narratives of some of my informants, and found resonances in a great many more, precisely because the abstract self-forming experience is in one way or another common to all the PRC scholars.

The Closure of the "Very China" Identity Drama

What the "very China" discourse captures is an experience in which the PRC scholars first become aware of their limitations (as in being "very China") and then, by desiring the "other" and learning from the "other", transcend those limitations. In other words, "very China"-ness is an idiom useful only to the extent that it is eventually negated. Indeed, this is why in my informants' narratives, "very China"-ness was usually spoken of in the past tense or attributed to others; when it was used in the present tense and directed at the self as a self-criticism, the latent desire was obviously to overcome whatever the speaker used this idiom to signify.

The occasionally essentialising and self-orientalising tones in which some of my PRC scholar informants narrated their "very China" dramas betrays the fact that underlying this discourse is the intense desire that can be involved in the process self-formation amidst international educational mobility and intercultural contact. Desire is perhaps seldom marked by calmness or preci-

sion; and it seemed that my informants themselves realised that “very China”-ness became a crude identity label and unhelpful category when allowed to outlast its “best-before date”. It was typically the scholars in the lower undergraduate years who were more vocal and enthusiastic in their use of this idiom amidst angst-ridden narratives, but when I interviewed and interacted with scholars who had graduated and entered professional life in Singapore for two or three years, the majority of them responded lukewarmly to my interests in their politics of identity, such as the “very China” drama. As one such relatively “seasoned” informant once politely hinted to me during an interview, my “fixation”—he put it to such an effect—on identities was somewhat misplaced. As “foreign talents” who have had a relatively successful journey studying and now working in Singapore, they have now left behind the type of “immature” identity politics that the “very China”-ness drama represented. For them, those once prominently felt differentiations and particularities among the SM1/2/3 PRC scholars gradually fade away or lose significance; furthermore, even the instrumental importance they once attached to the figure of otherness that is the local/Singaporean while they were undergraduate students now becomes obsolete. Regarding identity politics, the more seasoned of my informants were typically rather apathetic, and they were heard making statements such as: “It’s all case-by-case,” “It all depends on the individual” or even “There’s no Singaporeans and PRCs as such!”

This, I hasten to add, is not to suggest that identity/identification no longer matters for the PRC “foreign talents” once they have settled in Singapore for some time. Arguably, senses of self-identity and belonging are always important to human beings’ social existence. But as the desire underpinning identity politics changes, so do the foci or coordinates of identification. The (naïve) desire underpinning the “very China” identity discourse arose out of the younger PRC scholars’ fresh contact with otherness in the context of the Singaporean university campus; but when this desire has been satisfied and negated through their self-(trans)formation as I depicted in this ethnographic report, the “very China” discourse as a psychosocial process meets its closure. As the PRC scholars emerged from the “rite of passage” of undergraduate education into a more fully adult professional personhood, their identity discourses/practices and the underlying desires also move beyond relatively superficial or crude categories, such as nationality, and into categories more specifically relevant to their new life roles in relation to employment, personal relationships, family and so forth.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have offered an ethnographic account of the self-transformative experiences pertaining to Mainland Chinese “foreign talent” undergraduates (or “PRC scholars”) in the context of a Singaporean university. I entitled this account “a phenomenology of being ‘very China’”—playing a riff on philosopher Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*—because I borrowed certain Hegelian philosophical insights to interpret and elucidate the roles of self-consciousness, otherness, and desire in the PRC scholars’ experiences of subjective transformation revolving around the idiom of “very China”-ness. I tried to show that the encounter with otherness incites among many PRC scholars a critical self-consciousness of being “very China” that can be read as a desire that propels them to transcend their limiting subjectivities and achieve personal transformation. This way, this account contributes to our understanding regarding *how* transformation actually takes place at the subjective level for youthful subjects caught up at the intersection between the globalisation of higher education, nation-state strategies and individual aspirations and desires. It offers a thus-far relatively rare examination of education mobility involving students traveling to a sociocultural context that is closer to their home background (in this case: intra-Asia). Furthermore, although in Singapore the issue of “foreign talent” has for some time been a topic of much controversy and heated public debates, there has been virtually no empirical studies examining in detail the experiences of the “foreign talent” students in receipt of Singapore’s government scholarships; through ethnography, this paper sheds light into the lived experiences of the Mainland Chinese “foreign talent” scholars, and shows that the self-other dynamic central to the “foreign talent” problem involves more than just division or acrimony as folk discourses in Singapore tend to portray.

Finally, a few notes of qualification are in order. Firstly, it is worth stressing that this ethnographic report pertains to only one dimension of the PRC scholars’ experiences as “foreign talents” in Singapore, the whole picture of which is inevitably multifaceted and more diverse. And although I portray this dimension of the PRC undergraduate scholars’ self-formation through the rise and negation of a self-consciousness of being “very China”, I am not trying to reduce the necessarily messy sociocultural and psychological experiences of the PRC scholars to a romanticised “coming of age” tale with an evolutionist storyline. Having said this, based on his research project investigating international students’ self-formation experiences through interviewing 290 students, Simon Marginson (2014: 14, emphases added) recently remarked: “Not all international students talk readily about their own *reflexive evolution* and changing identity in interview *but many do.*” Insofar as this paper is concerned with the

PRC scholars’ self-perceived transformation, perhaps the “evolutionist” undertone to some of my informants’ “very China” stories reflects a characteristic narrative structure that is more widely observable among young international student-sojourners. The “very China” phenomenology as my informants told me and as I tell now might seem a suspiciously “perfect” story with a beginning, development and a closure ... but then, was it not anthropologist Clifford Geertz (2000: 28) who philosophically mused about human beings as such?—“We assemble the selves as we live in out of materials lying about in the society around us ... from birth on we are all active, impassioned ‘meaning makers’ in search of plausible stories.” Being “very China” was of course not a theme that came out equally strongly from all of my informants’ narratives, even less the exact expression used by all and everyone of them; but as I have stressed, “very China”-ness served as an idiom for both my research participants and myself—the ethnographer-analyst—to make sense of the process of their transformation.

Paying attention to such contextually specific and contingent idioms perhaps constitutes a potentially useful method in the study of lived experiences in relation to educational mobility and beyond.

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