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Ly Thi Tran • Catherine Gomes
Editors

International Student Connectedness and Identity

Transnational Perspectives

 Springer

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Transnational Perspectives

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Editors
Ly Thi Tran
School of Education
Deakin University
Burwood, VIC, Australia

Catherine Gomes
RMIT University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

*In memory of our colleague and friend Regis
Machart (1968–2016)*

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Chapter 13

Flexible Citizens or Disconnected Transmigrants? Chinese Student-Turned-Migrants in Singapore and Their Discourse on Mobility, Flexibility, and Identity

Peidong Yang

Abstract This chapter offers some considerations of the notion of *(dis-)connectedness*, drawing on a qualitative study of a group of Chinese student-turned-migrants in their mid- to late-20s in the Southeast Asian city-state Singapore. In contrast to analytical perspectives rooted in counseling and psychology, this chapter approaches (dis-)connectedness from a *sociocultural* perspective that is more conversant with discussions about migrants in sociology, sociocultural anthropology, and cultural studies. Specifically, it examines the student-turned-migrants' discourse about mobility, "flexible citizenship," and identity in relation to "culture," society, and the nation-state. Among other things, it is found that young Chinese student-turned-migrants in Singapore working in skilled professional jobs have a positive attitude toward mobility and flexibility, which implies a readiness to disconnect with places and to be on the move. Furthermore, it is argued that information technology such as social media enables them to adopt a dialecticism between being connected and being disconnected, whereby alleged connection might in fact be manifestations of disconnect. It is cautioned toward the end of the chapter, however, that these findings about the subjective experiences of (dis-)connectedness must be viewed against contextual specificities such as the age group and career stage of the informants.

Keywords "Flexible citizenship" • Foreign talent • Student-migrants • Singapore • China

P. Yang (✉)
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: y.peidong@gmail.com

Introduction

The pasture is always greener on the other side. (English saying)
The moon is brighter back home. [yue shi guxiang ming] (Chinese saying)

Juxtaposing these two sayings above brings out the tension between an arguably innate human psychological propensity to imagine and desire a better place “beyond” on the one hand and an equally instinctual craving for connections with the familiar, with the past, and with one’s “roots,” on the other. As border-crossing mobility becomes a key feature to the lives of ever greater numbers of people today, such tension-ridden subjective experiences also become increasingly commonplace and characteristic, not least for the rapidly rising numbers of international students worldwide (OECD 2013). Among the many issues arising from these students’ experiences potentially of social scientific interest, this chapter offers some considerations of the notion of *connectedness/disconnectedness*, drawing on an ethnographic study of a group of Chinese student-turned-migrants in the Southeast Asian city-state Singapore (Yang 2014b).

There is by now a substantial body of literature on international students, concentrated in fields such as educational studies (both policy and pedagogy focused), intercultural communication, psychology, and counseling. In the subset of this extensive literature that specifically deals with the student-sojourners’ sociocultural experiences of adjustment, *connectedness* has often been either explicitly (e.g., Cheung & Yue 2013; Doku & Meekums, 2014; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003) or implicitly recognized as an important factor contributing to international students’ well-being and successful academic and social outcomes. For instance, Brown’s (2009) research shows the significance of friendship, which is a crucial type of connection for international students. As Townsend and McWhirter (2005) quote in their comprehensive review article on the concept of connectedness, to be *connected* is “when a person is actively involved with another person, object, group, or environment, and that involvement promotes a sense of comfort, well-being, and anxiety-reduction” (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, & Bouwsema, 1993, p. 293).

This particular approach to connectedness, situated in the educationalist and/or counseling paradigms and underpinned by the disciplinary perspective of inter-/cross-cultural psychology, has evidently been productive and has indeed informed some of my own previous writings (Yang, 2014c, 2014d). However, there are alternative approaches that can arguably complement and enrich our existing understandings of what it means to be (dis-)connected for international students as migrant subjects in the making.

Echoing Gomes (2015) in her recent study of international students in Australia, this chapter moves away from the prevalent paradigms toward one involving analytical perspectives and frameworks that are influenced by sociology, sociocultural anthropology, and cultural studies. Thus, instead of the psychologist’s emphasis on interpersonal or individual-group connectedness as a determinant of well-being, this chapter proposes a *sociocultural* understanding of (dis-)connectedness emerging

from student-turned-migrants’ discourses revolving around issues such as “culture,” society, and the nation-state. In other words, this chapter represents an effort to draw out the contours of a sociologically and cultural studies inflected understanding of (dis-)connectedness through a grounded analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) of discourse.

Admittedly, such an open and emergent conception of (dis-)connectedness can be elusive. Thus, before examining the case of the Chinese student-turned-migrants in Singapore and parsing their discourse, I first provide some necessary conceptual reference points by briefly reviewing Aihwa Ong’s well-known theorizing of “flexible citizenship” and Vanessa Fong’s ethnographic research on Chinese international students studying in the developed world, with a view to foregrounding the theme of (dis-)connectedness that is implicit in their respective work.

(Dis-)Connectedness in “Flexible Citizenship” and Chinese Student-Migrants’ “Filial Nationalism”: Ways of Being and Ways of Belonging

Based on her observation of the significant number of well-off Chinese (ethnically speaking) migrants from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia who shuttled the Pacific Ocean between Asia and North America in 1990s, Aihwa Ong (1999) coined the term “flexible citizenship” to theorize the ways in which these well-heeled migrant subjects treated citizenship instrumentally as a strategic asset in their flexible accumulation and conversion of economic, social, and cultural capitals across national borders. Such a practice was in part a response to the political circumstances at that time, especially the return of Hong Kong sovereignty to the PRC in 1997, but it also harbingered a more general pattern of increasingly footloose human and capital flows that other scholars had also begun to observe (e.g., Mitchell, 1995; Skeldon, 1995). Ong’s thesis originally stemmed from a rather select group of socioeconomically privileged people, and it has also been subsequently criticized for overemphasizing flight/mobility and not paying sufficient attention to the processes of localization and forms of fixity in the transnational projects (e.g., Kalir, 2012; Waters, 2009). This notwithstanding, “flexible citizenship” has become a landmark conceptual idiom in research on contemporary human experiences of migration.

Although seldom framed as such explicitly, the discussions and debates around “flexible citizenship” can in fact be seen as centered on the idea of *(dis-)connectedness*. Under the “flexible citizenship” paradigm, there is presumably a disconnect between the migrant’s sociocultural and economic practices on one hand and their formal political identity on the other: while the flexible citizen acquires the passport of a certain country (i.e., a political regime), they may be largely *disconnected* from or indifferent toward this adoptive context but remain strongly *connected* in cultural and other ways to their original home country, or even to a network of places. What matters to flexible citizens is that the pattern of (dis-)connection is conducive to the flexible accumulation of economic and other forms of capital.

Meanwhile, Vanessa Fong's (2011) more recent ethnographic work shows that the logic of "flexible citizenship" is not necessarily the preserve of elite transmigrants but has become a powerful *imaginary* motivating the practice of ordinary young Chinese people venturing into the developed world in pursuit of education, cosmopolitan experience, and possibly residence/citizenship rights. China is currently the largest sender of overseas students in the world; in 2014, some 460,000 Chinese citizens went abroad for study (Caixin News, 2015). Source suggests that, as of 2006, only about a quarter of all Chinese students overseas had returned to China on a long-term basis (Welch & Zhen, 2008, p. 520), which gives an indication as to the size of the Chinese student-turned-migrants remaining abroad.

For these young Chinese subjects, increasingly originating from non-elite backgrounds, "flexible citizenship" often sets the horizon of their aspiration. Coining the notion of "filial nationalism" (Fong, 2004), Fong further notes that even as they desire and pursue citizenship in the developed world, these Chinese student-migrants nevertheless retain a nationalistic attachment to their home country in a way akin to filial piety. Thus, physical *disconnect* from the homeland or even the renunciation of birth citizenship on one hand and emotional/cultural/ideological *connectedness* on the other are found to be juxtaposed but not necessarily contradictory. This shows that the issue of (dis-)connectedness can be nuanced, even ambivalent, when considered in relation to sociological themes such as citizenship, nation-state, and/or cultural belonging.

In their seminal essay, Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) argue that for migrant subjects inhabiting the *transnational social field*, defined as "a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed [across national borders]" (p. 1009), a distinction must be made between their "ways of being" and "ways of belonging." While the *ways of being* refers to "the actual social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than to the identities associated with their actions" (p. 1010), *ways of belonging* refers to "practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group" (p. 1010). Importantly, these two domains need not overlap, in the sense that transmigrants can be immersed in transnational social relations (i.e., "being") without necessarily having the associated sense of cultural identifications (i.e., "belonging"). In other words, the two kinds of ways may be disconnected. Ong's and Fong's works usefully illustrate such disconnectedness in transnational subjecthood, with Ong's work focusing on the "ways of being" and Fong's study of "filial nationalism" emphasizing the "ways of belonging."

Another important point Fong makes in her book, which is captured in its title *Paradise Redefined*, is that *imagination* plays a key role in shaping the contours of the Chinese study-abroad students' desires and aspirations. An idealized imagination of the developed world as a paradise is subject to disillusionment or redefinition when the developed world is encountered in the real. Notwithstanding this, imagination remains extremely powerful as the initial motivator for their overseas adventures and as the ongoing impetus for their subsequent sojourning trajectories. What Appadurai (1991, p. 198) said more than two decades ago, "More persons in

more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before," is today even more true as information and communication technologies (ICT) rapidly develop and widely spread. In this chapter, I also highlight the constitutive role of the imagination in shaping the "flexible citizenship" discourses of the Chinese student-turned-migrants in Singapore. Indeed, I shall suggest that my research participants' "flexible citizenship" discourse sometimes rings hollow, for much of it seems to hinge on (ICT-)mediated imagining.

Furthermore, I shall argue that imagination mediates a *dialectical* relationship between connectedness and disconnectedness for the Chinese student-turned-migrants I studied. This is so in the sense that when they claim to be connected to a certain place, notably the homeland (i.e., China) they left behind, they do so often primarily through ICT-facilitated imagination. Not only might this kind of qualified connectedness be itself understood as a form of disconnectedness, it arguably also has the effect of reducing the need or incentive for these migrant subjects to desire more than the minimal level of connection with their immediate host context, i.e., Singapore—resulting in another kind of disconnect, namely, local disconnect. They become disconnected on both ends, in short.

It is such nuanced and sometimes contradictory dimensions to the notion of (dis-)connectedness that this chapter aims to explore. Before advancing these arguments with empirical data, some basic information about the research and its context is in order.

The Case and the Research: Singapore's PRC "Foreign Talent" Students

Facing declining population fertility and pressures to upgrade the skill levels of the workforce in order to remain competitive in a globalizing knowledge economy, the government of the Southeast Asian city-state Singapore has since the 1990s proactively sought to attract "foreign talent" to its shores. While broadly speaking "foreign talent" refers to a wide range of highly "value-adding" personnel such as professionals, businesspeople, scientists, artists, and so on, a major channel through which "foreign talent" is recruited and nurtured is education, especially tertiary education.

In early 2000s, the government of Singapore launched a "Global Schoolhouse" project, with the ambitious target of increasing the total number of foreign students in Singapore to 150,000 in a decade, hoping to make the city-state a regional center for education and knowledge creation (Ng & Tan, 2010). By the end of 2010, the total number of international students in Singapore approached 100,000 (Davie, 2010), though this number suffered some declines in the subsequent years. Behind this drive to recruit foreign students is the implicit expectation that many will seek work in Singapore after completing studies, thereby augmenting the city-state's population and workforce. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that young foreign

students who enroll in Singaporean primary and secondary schools typically receive invitation from the government of Singapore to become permanent residents (PR).

Various kinds of government-sponsored scholarship schemes were also put in place since the 1990s to secure high-caliber students from the Asian region, particularly the People's Republic of China (Yang, 2016). In 2012, the Singaporean Ministry of Education (MOE) admitted that annually some 2000 full scholarships were awarded to foreign students at tertiary and pre-tertiary levels (Seah, 2012). Most of the tertiary scholarships carry legal "bonds" requiring the recipients to work in Singapore for a number of years as a contribution back to the benefactor city-state, thus officially sanctioning the student-turned-migrant route. Until the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it was also a common practice for scholars to receive PR invitations upon completing their undergraduate studies.

Although due to the sensitiveness of the "foreign talent" issue (Yang, 2014a) it is not openly known exactly what percentages of student-turned-migrants in Singapore are of PRC background, it can be surmised with confidence that PRC Chinese make up a substantial group, if not the largest. This is because, on the one hand, the Singapore state seeks to replenish the Chinese population—being persistently the local ethnic group with the lowest fertility—in order to maintain the percentage of ethnic Chinese (historically about 75 %) in the national population composition (Yeoh & Lin, 2013, p. 35; Yim, 2011, p. 65); on the other hand, being a country where Mandarin is widely spoken, Singapore is not an unattractive destination for many Chinese students and migrants.

My broader research project was an ethnographic study of the Chinese "foreign talent" scholarship recipients in Singapore (see Yang, 2014d, for an overview), involving a 16-month double-sited fieldwork comprising discourse analysis, participant observation, semi-structured, as well as informal ethnographic interviews. My research participants included both "PRC scholars" who were still undergraduate students and those who had already turned into migrant working professionals. For this chapter, I focus only on the latter category, under which I carried out in-depth interviews in Mandarin with twenty informants. Being former scholarship recipients, almost all these interviewees studied engineering or science disciplines at university and had 6-year bonds with Singapore. At the time of my fieldwork (2011–2012), they were aged in their mid- to late 20s and had been 2 or 3 years into professional life (15/20) or postgraduate research training (5/20).

Imagination and "Flexible Citizenship" Discourse: Readiness to Disconnect

Imagination and comparison often go hand in hand. An *imaginary* is often constructed vis-à-vis a *reality* that is found to be undesirable or inadequate. Thus, an us-vs-them "comparative methodology" can be said to be characteristic of transnational imaginations and discourses. For the Chinese international students Vanessa

Fong studied, the us-them dichotomy is one between a wanting China and an idealized developed world:

Backwardness, poverty, corruption, jealousy, and dependence on instrumental social networks (*guanxi*) topped the list of "Chinese characteristics" these teenagers found most deplorable in comparison with what they perceived as the wealthier, more meritocratic, more modern, less treacherous, more independent, and less socially exhausting life available in wealthier societies. (Fong, 2004, p. 638)

In this section, I look at the discourses of imagination and comparison voiced by the PRC "foreign talent" student-turned-migrants in Singapore. As it turns out, in contrast to the China-West dichotomy Fong articulated, for my research participants, narratives of imagination and comparison involved not two but *three* places, or imaginary constructs. As these "foreign talent" subjects have already lived in *Singapore* for a number of years, this developed city-state has become for them less a site of imagination but more a place of concrete experience. In contrast, their homeland *China*, now seen and experienced only from some distance, increasingly takes the place of a site of fascination and imagination. On top of these two places that are alternately them/us and home/abroad, then there remains a third place: the "real" (read *white*) developed West that constitutes the boundary marking, ultimate "other" in their imaginations.

In their imaginary "shopping" between these three imaginary spaces, various parameters or criteria are applied. Prominent among these are social welfare provisions such as education, healthcare, and retirement systems, life-work balances, and the presence of sociocultural discrimination and exclusion. For instance, education in China is believed to be strong and rigorous at the foundational level but inferior at higher levels to the Westernized Singaporean system and ultimately to the world-leading educational systems of North America. My interlocutors not only comparatively spoke about these different educational systems from their own experiences and perspectives but also thought about their future children's education.

With regard to healthcare, the general perception is that the European welfare states operate "cradle-to-grave" care systems and are therefore the most desirable. The USA is much less desirable, because it does not provide universal healthcare but relies heavily on private insurance. (Interestingly, many informants cited what they had been reading on the Internet about President Obama's efforts at reforming the American healthcare system, which happened to be going on during the time of my fieldwork.) Singapore, for many informants, was not very desirable when it comes to social welfare either, as provisions are considered not extensive, although many acknowledged that the quality of medical care is high, and the system is transparent and reliable. China's healthcare system, in contrast, is regarded as extortionately expensive and often corrupt, though not necessarily inferior in technical terms.

On work-life balances or lifestyle in general, a common perception is that Western/European countries are the most relaxed but do not provide opportunities for big-time success. Singapore, on the other hand, with its highly regulated and relatively mature economy, is considered to offer reasonable spaces to develop one's

career steadily but not the kind of seemingly endless exciting opportunities that China as a fast-developing dynamic economy offers. Most informants also mentioned explicit or implicit racial discrimination as a factor that undermines the desirability of the West—a problem much less relevant in the Singapore context.

The list of comparative criteria goes on, but the above should be illustrative. As different national-cultural “systems” can be more or less desirable depending on which criterion is applied, choosing among these systems involves maximizing the advantages through practicing mobility and flexibility in citizenship and being ready to disconnect with places without so much as the baggage of attachment. During the interviews, I was often struck by the remarkable tone of confidence and optimism in which this “flexible citizenship” discourse was voiced. Having by now accumulated a fair amount of useful capitals (a widely recognized education; bilingualism in arguably the two most important languages in today’s world, i.e., English and Chinese; cross-cultural experiences, and working experiences in Singapore-based international corporations, among others), these Chinese student-turned-migrants spoke of transnational mobility in what seemed to be a taken-for-granted manner. They were born and raised in China, received a Singaporean higher education, and have seen the developed West through exchange programs or overseas internships, and thus the world is not such a strange place for them anymore. Even if not immediately in a position to move frictionlessly and choose a most desirable country to live and work in, it is not beyond imagination for certain opportunities in the near future to allow them to do so.

Kexin¹ (26, F, shipping executive) had at the time of interview never traveled to any Western country yet, but she nonetheless spoke as follows in response to my question probing where she’d like to live in the future:

Well, I don’t know yet. Let’s see. Now I am already a Singaporean citizen, so it’s relatively easy for me to travel. Hopefully in the coming year I will have an opportunity to travel on business to Australia. If not I will just go there for holiday. And I can take a look (*kan yi kan*). Maybe further down the road I will also get to travel to Europe and the US, and then with some first-hand experiences, I can compare for myself, to see which is the most suitable environment for development (*fazhan*) and living (*shenghuo*).

Or take the example of Aijia (26, F) who was at the time of the interview about to complete her PhD in Civil Engineering from a Singaporean university. Aijia had been in a relationship with her Chinese banker boyfriend for over 2 years. Her boyfriend was then based in Shanghai, and the two of them had met when he was previously posted to Singapore for a half-a-year period. Now maintaining a relationship straddling Singapore and Shanghai, the two of them traveled back and forth to visit each other several times a year. When I asked Aijia what their plans were regarding the future, her reply was illustrative of the “flexible citizenship” strategy that many others of my research subjects also adopted or did not mind adopting. Aijia suggested that as long as the arrangement is pursuant to the interest of their careers and their quality of life, they are happy to straddle across Singapore and China. After her PhD graduation, she might seek work in Singapore, and eventually obtain Singaporean citizenship. In the future, when Aijia and her boyfriend get married and raise children, their children would have the option of receiving education in either China or Singapore, depending on which would then seem to be the better

choice. Her future husband, on the other hand, would probably retain his Chinese citizenship so she could easily go back to China for visits, and vice versa. With each of them holding a different passport, they will be able to flexibly and simultaneously enjoy the best of the two countries.

In such manners, personal career development (*shiye/geren fazhan*) and quality of living (*shenghuo zhiliang*) feature as two key pursuits toward which the flexible “shopping of countries” is geared. It is typical to hear my interviewees say something along the line of “As long as it’s good for career development and family life, anywhere in the world is okay.” In other words, in their imagination and discourse, these Chinese student-turned-migrants displayed a positive and easy attitude toward flexibility and mobility. Importantly, this also means that *connectedness* to a certain place or environment, be it physical or social, in the sense of long-term stable residence or immersion, matters relatively little to them. Instead, for what they truly desire, they seem more than ready to be on the move, to disconnect from the old and to connect with the new.

Disconnected or Connected...through “Culture”

Alongside this imagination-driven “flexible citizenship” discourse which betrays the Chinese student-turned-migrants’ fairly easy attitude toward disconnection or a readiness to disconnect, they sometimes also talk about (dis-)connectedness in a more grounded and experiential way. When they did so, the notion of “culture” was often brought up, thus illuminating another important way, i.e., the “cultural,” in which they understood the meaning of (dis-)connectedness.

During interviews, several of my informants mentioned that in Singapore, human connections were “thin” (*renqing danbo*) compared with that in China, and they saw this as an unsatisfying aspect of the Singaporean “culture.” Some say that the human connections in Singapore are mainly business and transactional relations, invested with too much interest and utilitarianism, but not enough genuine emotion and solicitude. Zi Guang (26, M), who worked in a local Singaporean civil engineering company, observed as follows:

In Singapore I think the human connections are thin (*renqing danbo*). Everybody *dabao* [takeaway] food², even the core family *dabao* food and eat on their own. There is not enough connection. [...] Everybody is like an isolated entity standing alone (*meigeren xiang dandu de yigen ci*).

The implication of what my informants considered to be “thin” human connections in Singapore is that there lacks “warmth” in daily life, resulting in social and emotional life characterized by loneliness and isolation, in other words, little connectedness. However, it must be pointed out that such an observation from my informants was mainly an evaluation of the Singapore society they made from the positionality as outsiders and probably reflected more accurately their own disconnect with the local Singaporean society than the state of general human connectedness in the Singaporean “culture.” Thus, when I probed my informant by asking

whether their perception of "thin" human connections in Singapore might not have been due to the fact that they were not yet an integral part of the local people's social life, some readily conceded so. The majority of informants agreed that whereas they had many local colleagues and friends, their best friends often remained other Mainland Chinese in Singapore. In other words, not being connected with the Singapore society and culture makes some Chinese student-migrants perceive that society and culture in Singapore are characterized by thin human connectedness.

If Zi Guang's above comment represented an affective and nonutilitarian understanding of connectedness, then the following anecdote told by Peng (27, M), an entrepreneurially spirited self-employed informant, hinted at a more instrumental or utilitarian conception of connectedness, which he found also lacking in Singapore:

I know one of the secretaries working in the Chinese Embassy here. The other day, a friend of mine was in urgency to go abroad on a Sunday; however, her passport was being renewed at the Embassy, and the Embassy is closed on Sunday. So she phoned me up to see if I could help. I phoned up the secretary friend in the Embassy, explained the matter to him, and he helped to retrieve the new passport immediately, and asked my friend to go and collect it. You see, this is the flexibility you have with Chinese people. In a Singaporean context, this would never have happened.

It seems that what Peng was putting his finger on here is another type of "flexibility," one afforded by the type of connection/connectedness that has been commonly referred to in Chinese as *guanxi*. Literally meaning "relationships," cultural anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (1997) explains that *guanxi* unifies material exchanges and obligations with *ganqing*—the Chinese term for emotion or affection. Through examining the ways in which the affective and the instrumental cannot be clearly compartmentalized in Chinese sociality, Kipnis highlights the specificity of the tendency in Western modernity to separate the instrumental/transactional relations from the affective/emotional domain.

Peng's anecdote was rather unique, but the gist of his comment, namely, that in Singapore the kind of flexibility stemming from personal connection/connectedness is lacking when compared with the case of China, was echoed by some of my other informants. Some used the Chinese terms *ziru du* or *shufu du*, roughly translated as the "level of agility" or "cultural comfort." Reflecting on their experiences of working in Singapore, several informants pointed out that here, rules were a bit "rigid" (*siban*), without room for maneuver (*huixuan de yudi*).

It must be stressed that the Chinese *guanxi* social philosophy is emphatically not one about merely instrumental and utilitarian exchange and transactions. As both Kipnis (1997) and Osburg (2013) show, for the Chinese, *guanxi* is about affective and emotional connectedness, and the material and transactional aspect is just a manifestation of this nonmaterial connectedness. What appears to be instrumental materiality in fact serves to cement or materialize the nonmaterial connection. Because for some of the Chinese student-turned-migrants I interviewed in Singapore, the "rigid" local rules obstructed certain material exchanges and transactions, this was interpreted as a sign that nonmaterial connectedness is lacking. Again, it must be added here that the discourse of my informants reflected their own conception

and perception of connectedness in Singapore, which is more likely a function of their own degree of (dis-)connectedness to the local society, people, and workplace and not necessarily an accurate or objective characterization of the latter.

Patriotic yet Disconnected: Discourse on Citizenship and National Identity

Although virtually all of my informants have taken up the permanent residence (PR) status offered by the government of Singapore upon their university graduation³, few had made the move yet to acquire full citizenship at the time of my research fieldwork. Partly this was because many informants still considered it early times to make such a decision and would rather "take one step at a time" or "keep watching" (*guanwang*). For those who clearly saw themselves settling down in Singapore in the future, the application is made sooner rather than later. For example, Kexin, who works in the shipping industry, believed that because of her professional field, it was definitely more advantageous for her to be based in Singapore. Thus, she applied for and was granted citizenship just over 3 years after university graduation. Although Zhi Cong, a 26-year-old male informant who originally came from rural Hubei in China, hadn't made the application yet, he hinted that he would probably do so soon as well—"It would only be good for me, you see, in China, I have a rural *hukou* (household registration)⁴; by becoming a Singaporean, next time I'd be an "overseas Chinese" (*huaqiao*) when I visit China. I don't have much to lose by taking up the Singapore citizenship."

The instrumental and calculative way in which my informants look at citizenship status is clearly demonstrated in their often-made comment or, *complaint* rather, about China's nonacceptance of dual citizenship. In fact, were China (and Singapore too, of course, which does not accept dual citizenship) to accept dual citizenship, my informants, as well as most other Chinese migrants would not think another second about acquiring an additional passport. In other words, a great many Chinese "foreign talents" and Chinese transmigrants in general currently hesitate to take up foreign citizenships primarily due to the exclusive citizenship regime of China, the desirability of which is arguably on the rise. Were there to be no such exclusivity, citizenship would indeed be an asset to be "accumulated" by these flexible subjects to maximize their advantage. Thus, when it comes to the formal/legal membership in a specific regime, cool-headed calculation is the dominant logic.

Neither the student-turned-migrants that I interviewed nor the general Chinese immigrants in Singapore that I knew of made the link between citizenship status to the issue of loyalty or patriotism. "(Legal) citizenship doesn't necessarily have to do with your sense of belonging," I was told quite a few times by different informants. One's connection with China as the motherland—to the extent such an attachment exists—will not change with the change of passport. For most part, national identity or matters like loyalty or patriotism or nationalist sentiment seemed to matter very

little for my informants. Only after being pressed would they try to offer some thoughts on this issue, usually to the effect of saying that their emotional attachment and connection remain stronger with China rather than their adoptive home Singapore. For example, one informant Min Jian (M, 25, PhD student) put it, "my heart will always be inclined towards the side of China (*wode xin yongyuan hui xiangzhe zhongguo*)."

That these student-turned-migrants claim they retain an emotional connection to their homeland China is, in itself, not a refreshing finding. However, if one were to subject the concrete expressions of their "patriotic" sentimentality to ethnographic examination, it seems a pinch of salt is in order, for much of the connections that supposedly sustain such attachment seem to be again highly mediated, driven by imagination. For the most part, connections with China consisted of the daily browsing of China-related news and China-based "infotainment" on the Internet or TV. "How do you mean when you say you are more emotionally connected to China?"—I would probe my informants along such a line, and their replies would typically run something like "Well, you just care about it; reading the news about China; browsing some blogs to see the big social events and scandals..." In other words, for transmigrants such as these student-turned-migrants living outside China, China is largely experienced as an abstraction, comprising mostly information and signs. Their patriotic attachment to or connectedness with China tends also to be expressed through symbolic acts such as leaving a comment on a China-related news article or "liking" a post on Facebook that says China will soon take over the USA in GDP.

One of my informants, Ouyang (27, M, civil engineering consultant), remarked revealingly in an interview, "Close your door, and turn on the computer, you feel just as if in China." Among all my interlocutors, Ouyang was among those who stayed most closely connected with China, in the sense that he kept highly up-to-date about China-related current affairs and demonstrated notable pride and defensiveness when our topics turned to Chinese politics, culture, and society. Compared with others, Ouyang also stood out in how much he remained loyal to Mainland China-based media and the infotainment it offers. He would be close to the type of person one has in mind when words such as "nationalism" and "patriotism" are invoked. But even for him, China is in most part an abstract domain of symbols and imagination that one switches on when one switches on the laptop or social media. One's emotional attachment and patriotic sentiments can be kindled and rehearsed in this domain, but as we can imagine for Ouyang, when he switches off his computer and opens his door to go to his Singapore-based workplace, he is immediately presented with the mundanity of white-collar professional life in a highly cosmopolitan global city which has little use for his emotive attachment to China.

In the mundane spheres of daily work and living, pragmatism and flexibility are still the principles that govern my informants' thinking and behavior, while high sentiments such as patriotism and national loyalty are relegated to a symbolic compartment suffused with signs, imagination, fantasization, but little more. Precisely because information and communication technology has now allowed people to

participate in symbolic self-expressions of identity and belonging independent of their physical locations, pragmatism and flexibility can be adopted even more fully in their mundane and extra-symbolic life domains. Here we glimpse the dialectical relationship between connectedness and disconnectedness, mediated by ICT-enabled imagination.

Here lies my trouble with Fong's "filial nationalism" thesis as well as Hail's (2015) more recent argument about Chinese students being "patriotic abroad"—not that their observations of Chinese students' nationalistic or patriotic sentiments and discourses are not valid, but, instead, ultimately how much such sentiments and discourses really amount to? Many sojourning Chinese claim to be strongly attached to China and to be "patriotic," even as they prefer not to physically live there. Having a secure "base" abroad (in the form of permanent residency or citizenship) means they can "dip in and out" of China at ease. This flexibility allows the sojourners the privilege to criticize and bemoan what is amiss with China while singing the sentimental songs of patriotism. The limitation of such kind of connectedness should be clearly recognized.

Furthermore, the by-and-large middle-class background of my "foreign talent" research participants means that their families and friends in China are usually not the immediate victims of China's myriad social problems. This tinges their solicitous attachment to China with a certain character of "watching the fire from the opposite side of the river" as the Chinese idiom goes (*ge'an guanhuo*)—what I venture to call a "patriotism at a safe distance." This somewhat hollowed-out connectedness, sustained through, yet suspended in, ICT-enabled imaginations/imaginaries, seems to be one important feature to note when the question of connection and disconnection is considered with regard to migrant subjects such as international students.

Conclusion

In this chapter, through examining the discourse of a group of Chinese "foreign talent" scholars in Singapore, I have tried to offer a grounded understanding of what it means to be connected or disconnected for international student-turned-migrants. As opposed to the dominant approach of studying (dis-)connectedness which is underpinned by a psychologist paradigm, this chapter has employed an approach that emphasizes sociocultural themes, with an ethnographic sensibility. The outcome is an explorative account that unpacks the notion of (dis-)connectedness, foregrounding the social actors' own terms—an emic view.

To some extent resonating with previous research such as Aihwa Ong's work on "flexible citizenship" and Vanessa Fong's observation of "filial nationalism" among Chinese students abroad, my research in the context of Singapore also found the discourse of flexibility and mobility to be rather prevalent and characteristic and that

student-migrants claimed certain affective or emotional connectedness to their homeland. However, I argue rather than “flexible citizens,” perhaps the term *disconnected trans-/migrants* might be more appropriate for these subjects because, given that their discourse of flexibility is mostly sustained by the practice of imagination, such a discourse reflects more accurately their disconnectedness and readiness to disconnect and not so much their objective capacity for mobility and flexibility.

Furthermore, through highlighting the role of the ICT in enabling imaginations and discourses, I caution against idealizing or essentializing the political subjectivities of Chinese student-migrant subjects abroad. Their purported connectedness with the homeland (or even nationalistic or patriotic sentiments) should be taken with a pinch of salt, or even dialectically regarded as precisely a form of disconnectedness, for sometimes there is little more that sustains such connection than the Wi-Fi connection.

Before ending, however, one qualification to the research findings must be registered. As noted earlier, in this research, my interviewees aged mostly in their mid- or late 20s. It is possible, indeed likely, that their discourse about flexibility and mobility and their disconnectedness or even readiness to disconnect reflected their relatively young age and their early career stage. Thus, the findings reported here should be read strictly against the age range of my informants and may not be assumed to be applicable to different age groups, or migrant subjects of other demographic characteristics.

To end, I argue in agreement with Gomes (2015) that the default binary categorization “home-host” used in studying international student-migrants is increasingly simplistic and obsolete. Like my research participants who were recruited and nurtured by Singapore as “foreign talent,” increasingly student-migrants are in various ways “in betweeners,” for whom what truly constituted the “home” or the “host” becomes ambiguous, unstable, and problematic. In this context, investigating connectedness and disconnectedness represents an exciting and challenging endeavor, toward which this chapter is a small effort.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Singapore specialist Lai Ah-Eng (1995, p. 49) indeed noted that in Singapore there was a “high frequency of eating out.”
3. The practice of offering PR invitations to “foreign talent” scholars stopped after 2008 when popular discontent rose.
4. The household registration system in China categorizes the population broadly under rural and urban and allocates resources and welfare accordingly (Solinger, 1999). Although the system’s influence has significantly diminished as reform deepened in China, *hukou* still affects a citizen’s life chance and symbolic status in China.

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Chapter 14

Transnational Student-Migrants and the Negotiation of Connectedness and Self-Identity in Australia: The Pains and Gains

Hannah Soong

Abstract As globalisation deepens, student mobility through international education-migration nexus is becoming a prominent feature of today's global education landscape. Over the last decades, international students have become more visible in most universities, especially in developed countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Europe, North America and even some parts of the Asia-Pacific region. Yet, beneath these visibilities of international students, very few scholarly projects have looked into the desire for overseas education as part of an *imagined mobility* for transnational flows to adequately deal with the heterogeneity and complexities of education-migration interactions. Drawing on an ethnographic study of seven international student-migrants undertaking Australian Teacher Education, I investigate how students' imagination for mobility can be a more useful way of understanding the reality of their sense of connectedness and self-identity. By using the work of *imagined mobility* as a lens for analysis (Soong, 2016), the chapter illustrates how the forms and workings of transnational connectedness are being shaped, rendering the transnational student-migrant a subject of 'being in flux' between the pains and gains.

Keywords Transnational connectedness • Being in flux • Imagination • Education-migration interactions

Part of the findings is published in my recent book publication by Routledge (2016).

H. Soong (✉)
University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
e-mail: Hannah.Soong@unisa.edu.au