

Assimilate the Individual 'I' into the Collective 'We'? Mainland China Students' Localisation and Adaptation during their Study in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The binary concept of globalise/localise, similarities/differences as well as the issue of actualise/neutralise (Vischer, 1989, 1996; Hall, 2003) constitutes the major focus of this study. Framing the above into the cross-boundary education, it would be interesting to know how 'diasporic consciousness' re-generates Mainland China students' identity and sense of belonging. More specifically, this paper aims for an understanding of students from Mainland China's psychological perceptions and social needs during their study in Hong Kong. Previous survey on students from Mainland China revealed that along with their learning experiences, students are constantly confronting with the struggles of localisation and adaptation to the Hong Kong community. Hence, from a social-psychological perspective, we will take a close look into two questions: What are the Mainland students' perceptions? How do they localise and assimilating themselves into the Hong Kong community?

The empirical work of this study was conducted to a group of 28 students from Mainland China studying in Hong Kong. Additional interviews were also conducted to teachers. Findings suggest that in general, the 'diasporic consciousness' drawn the students to reflect on the labelling effects of 'Gangpiao'. Students expected a multi-cultural learning experience and they would like to build friendship between local peers in order to blend into the Hong Kong community. Mutual acceptance was another important issue that came to attention. They also showed consciousness about their identities during their study. This further indicates that they had exercised self-actualisation/neutralisation, localisation/adaptation activities so as to assimilate the individual 'I' into the collective 'We'.

Keywords:

Cross-boundary education, Mainland China students, diasporic consciousness, self-identity, sense of belonging, self-actualisation, neutralisation

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with the relevance of globalisation and localisation, attachment and detachment and, in particular, how identity, localisation and assimilation are generated in the stage of exile. More specifically, this paper aims to reveal an understanding of Mainland China students' perceptions of self-identity and sense of belonging during their cross-boundary study in Hong Kong. Looking at the issue in a social-psychological perspective, this paper also articulates the concept of 'diaspora', represents people as not only being deterritorialised, cross-boundary and estranged, but argues that they use "multiple masks and a repertoire of performances to conceal an absence of self" (Höpfl, 2007) so as to re-generate an identity and a sense of belonging for oneself. It also highlights the salient needs for identity and individuality through self-actualisation and neutralisation activities (Vischer, 1989; 1996). Framing the above into the cross-boundary education, it would be interesting to know how Mainland China students assimilate themselves into the Hong Kong community.

Exile, diaspora consciousness, identity and sense of belonging

The concepts of '*exiled*' and '*diaspora*' are arguable. Exile as interpreted by Milosz is a stage of alienation and loss of harmony with the surrounding space and the diasporic experience creates anxiety of the unfamiliar and nostalgia (Milosz, 1998). The issue of diaspora has long been studied by academia in the area of humanities and social science. Vertovec uses diaspora to describe people being deterritorialised, transnational and exiled (Vertovec, 1999). Chander defines "diaspora [as] groups who maintain ties to a homeland while living abroad... [the attempt to] accommodate the dual loyalties" (Chander, 1999, p.1005). Brubaker also claims that nowadays definitions of diaspora are not limited to a sharp and definitive break with a homeland; some of those living in the diaspora are guest-workers, while others are immigrants, expatriates etc. In view of the above, we attempt to extend and apply the concept of exile and diaspora to the students of cross-boundary study. To adapt the concepts of diaspora and exile to the cross-boundary study: metaphorically, the cross-boundary programmes and Mainland China students are being exiled from his/her homeland, and their nostalgic dislocations from geographical origins can be seen as an analogy. Applying the concept of diasporic to the cross-boundary study, students are literally being 'casted away' from families and friends exiled from his/her 'homeland' into a new city, where he/she becomes a stranger, with all the negotiations of entry and accommodation that this demands. This prompts feelings of 'being faraway yet so close' and being simultaneously 'exiled' and 'detached' during their study.

Vertovec finds that the diaspora in exile will generate 'diaspora consciousness', the negative and positive experience of being discriminated and identified with one's own historical heritage (Vertovec, 1999, p.8). Clifford suggests that "diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a definite tension" (Clifford, 1994, cited in Vertovec, 1999). Axel argues that the context of diaspora is "a process of displacement and demoralization that facilitates the productions of both difference and identity" (Axel, 2004, p.30). Hall adapts Derrida's 'différance' to illustrate the trace and the positioning of the unstable, metaphorical and even contradictory identity constituted by similarities and differences (Hall, 2003). In a similar view, Brubaker expresses the view that diaspora is now awakened in search of true identity in a

temporally extended, inter-generational process and claims for “boundary-maintenance”: the preservation of a distinctive identity *vis-a-vis* the host society, reluctance to be assimilated and emphasises the “homeland orientation” (homeland as authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty) in the definitions of diaspora (Brubaker, 2005). All these suggest that the constant search of self-identity and sense of belonging is a result of the diaspora consciousness. Höpfl claims that the site of performance as seen in religious rituals is nevertheless regulated by an anterior authority; metaphorically, educational institutions are hierophantic spaces and their sites of performance are regulated by the absent author-creator from afar in order to turn the individual “I” into the collective “We”. These “converts” or “the believers” actively demonstrate their commitment to the values and customs of their new land (Höpfl, 2007, p.15). Following the same vein, Hopfl’s view suggests that like the inhabitants of a diaspora, students may use a strategy of “converts” or “believers” to re-generate a sense of belonging, an identity for oneself. Sense of belonging and identity to the transnational and overseas programme are frequently addressed by students. In a study, Lau and Ng’s study finds that the struggles for identity rest in multiple dimensions of societal, self, school and programme (Lau and Ng, 2014). Another survey on students from Mainland China studying cross-boundary programmes in Hong Kong also brings out the concerns of social, cultural and mutual acceptance. Other burning issues include daily living and emotional adaptations. In order to accommodate and blend into the Hong Kong society, the students from Mainland China expressed that they would change their thinking and living styles (Hong Kong Ideas Centre, 2013). To a large extent, the above literature and studies purport the diasporic consciousness during the stage of exile, which can be considered as a kind of boundary-maintenance. On one hand, the dilemma to preserve one’s identity by maintaining strong ties with one’s personal life to maintain sense of belonging, while on the other, accommodate to the new by changing ways of thinking and living.

Research design, methodology and analysis

Literature review was first conducted for a holistic understanding of the issue of cross-boundary education and its implementations. This was followed by an empirical study conducted in one of Hong Kong’s largest educational institution. A questionnaire survey was conducted to a group of 28 students from Mainland China studying different Higher Diploma Programmes (18 in Business and Management, five in Design, two in Hotel, Service and Tourism Studies and three in Engineering) in the participated institution in Hong Kong. The questionnaire contained 20 close-ended items and one open-ended qualitative overall comment to addressing their expectations of their cross-boundary study, their sense of belonging and identity and their localisation/adaptation to blend into the Hong Kong community. The close-ended type questions were on a 6 points Likert scale (1 is Strongly Disagreed, 6 is Strongly Agreed). Additional interviews with three teachers who worked closely with the students were also conducted to draw their observations and facilitations on the students’ assimilation and adaptation to their studies and daily lives in Hong Kong. Frequent and mean were generated from the data of the close-ended items from the questionnaires while the open-ended comments were transcribed and analysed. The individual interviews with the teachers were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was adopted to identify the theme from the qualitative data. Key words were identified for establishing the core themes for analysis. For the coding purpose,

phrases were used and the interview notes were then coded and used for the findings and discussions.

Findings

Responses from the questionnaires indicated that out of the 28 students, six (21%) had the experiences of studied abroad (two in United Kingdom, one in South Africa, one in Australia, one in Canada and one in France). To address learning expectation and needs when studying cross-boundary programmes, data collected from the questionnaires revealed that all the 28 students (100%) expected multi-perspective teaching contents, interactions, mutual help and peer supports to build and share knowledge in a multi-cultural learning environment. Nearly all of them preferred pair-up tasks and peer learning teams to facilitate their learning as well as rapport building with local students (96%). All of them (100%) preferred contextualisation (glocalisation) of the contents to nurture their intercultural experiences. 27 students (96%) would like to mingle with local Hong Kong students and all of them (100%) would like out-of-class connections and communications with teachers and students. All of them (100%) appreciated the supports and communication channels provided by the school that nurtured their intercultural experiences besides the subject knowledge. On the contrary, most of them (80%) regarded the nature of the cross-boundary study brought forward their views on sense of belonging and identity; and as students from Mainland China, they did not have much affiliation with the Hong Kong community. The above findings also set the scene to address the pertinent cultural issues from a social-psychological perspective. The qualitative comments showed that they considered studying a cross-boundary programme gave them the feelings of ‘alienation’ from their home country, and thus maintaining ‘collective identity’ and ‘ties’ with their local fellow students since they regarded themselves as “Gangpiao” (the diaspora in Hong Kong). Sometimes they rather “kept an arm’s length with the local community” because of “the recent conflicts between Hong Kong people and the tourists from Mainland China”¹. Interestingly, these qualitative comments contradicted with the responses from the close-ended items and it could be a result of their non-pleasant experiences, struggles and frustrations during their endeavours to assimilate themselves into the community of Hong Kong.

Interviews with the three teachers revealed that both local students and teachers’ “openness and acceptance to students from Mainland China is important”. With an open mind, teachers would adopt all necessary accommodation and play an active role in communication with the students from Mainland China. To create an atmosphere of assimilation in the classroom, “mingling both local and students from Mainland China was needed”. The teachers also observed that local students’ acceptance and support to students from Mainland China is crucial to generate sense of belonging so as to help students from Mainland China to adapt to local study and living, Examples include contextualising and localising the learning materials for better learning, shopping for daily living necessities, engaging in intercultural activities, to name a

¹A sharp increase of tourists from Mainland China, due to the introduction of the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) by the Hong Kong Government in 2003 created tensions between the Hong Kong people and Mainland China tourists. There are impacts of the quality of life such as the raise of living expense, the increase of property price, the overloading of transportation as well as the city’s hygiene etc.

few, to ease students from Mainland China's confrontation of psychological and social difficulties (homesick, language barrier, social activities, weather, food and culture etc.). Therefore, extra support was necessary. The teachers also asserted that extra tutorials, activities and connections outside classroom such as using social media (QQ/WeChat) to communicate with students using written messages provide essential and timely supports.

In sum, the findings enabled a better understanding of the perceptions of the students from Mainland China studying in cross-boundary education for an in-depth discussion of the issue in a societal and psychological aspect.

Discussion

Cross-cultural experiences are “necessary” and “beneficial” to study

Responses from the interviews revealed that cross-cultural experiences are “necessary” and “beneficial” to the study of students from Mainland China. Common views of students were found in their learning expectations and needs. Most importantly, they preferred contextualisation (glocalisation) of the contents to nurture their intercultural experiences besides the subject knowledge. Secondly, all of them expected interactions, mutual help and peer supports to build and share knowledge. Either the needs to build in-class rapports with fellow students or to nurture cross-cultural exchanges and experiences at out-of-class time, the students have developed their own strategies to cope with their localisation and assimilation. During the interview with the teachers, we learnt that the students from Mainland China not only discussed, supported and shared teaching and learning matters among themselves but also with local students and teachers. All these activities and interactions suggest that the students from Mainland China were eager to build friendship with their local peers in order to blend into the local Hong Kong communities. Students said with best endeavours, they tried to overcome the obstacles such as language barrier, food, weather as well as homesick that happened in their daily lives to better accommodate the local culture.

Consciousness of ‘Gangpiao’

Further probing into the findings showed the similarities and differences of the students in terms of sense of belonging, boundary-maintenance, acceptance, self-actualisation and neutralisation. Most of the students from Mainland China were aware of their sense of belonging. As ‘Gangpiao’ (the diaspora exiles in Hong Kong), students regarded that cross-cultural experience was “necessary” and “beneficial” during their studies. They maintained out-of-class connections and communications with their local classmates so that they could mingle and assimilate themselves into the Hong Kong community. They were constantly aware of their identities and sense of belonging while meticulously kept an arm's length from the host country and reminded themselves not to cross the fine grey line in order to gain acceptance from their local Hong Kong students. It seems that these psychological reactions and behaviours from the students were self-actualisation and neutralisation activities they used to regulate their diasporic complexes. After all, it is their ‘diasporic consciousness’ that draw the students to reflect on the “labelling effects of Gangpiao”.

Maintaining openness and acceptance

Mutual acceptance was an issue that came to attention because the students from Mainland were maintaining their boundary while engaging in cultural exchanges with their fellow Hong Kong students. As most students from Mainland China showed consciousness about their identities during their study and this further indicates that they had exercised self-actualisation/neutralisation, localisation/adaptation activities so as to assimilate the individual 'I' into the collective 'We'. With an open mind, they also maintain a large degree of openness and acceptance that enabled them to sharpen self-awareness, to re-generate their identities and broaden their global views. These activities indicate the students' awareness of their dual locality/identity. This is this diasporic consciousness that draw them to reflect on the "labelling effects" so as to adapt themselves to the local culture in order to assimilate the individual "I" into the collective "We". It could be considered as a form of model of cultural production (Vertovex, 1999) to produce identities through transformation and difference. Moreover, there is a need to be conscious about one's identity and sense of belonging for their cross-boundary study. This further urged them to reconsider their views that as non-local students, they should constantly remind themselves to remain silent as an outsider, keeping an arm's length from the host county and at the same time constructing new identities by acquiring the values and customs of the new land. As some of the Mainland students said, "Hong Kong is a stepping stone for them" and some of them "would like to stay, work and get the citizenship", they were very "cautious on not crossing the fine grey line" for some reasons such as "the Hong Kong local students always have negative thoughts that the Mainland students will steal their jobs by staying in Hong Kong after their studies". These self-actualisation and neutralisation activities were carried out to promote mutual trust, accommodation and acceptance between the local Hong Kong and Mainland students.

Cultural similarities generate localisation and adaptation

Interestingly, the Chinese custom of maintaining a low profile and the culture of a docile, subtle stance and harmonious relationships are revealed. The above shows it was rather the cultural similarities that generated the development of localisation/adaptation for the students from Mainland China studying in Hong Kong, most probably it was the results of the common Chinese languages, Chinese characteristics, learning styles and customs that enabled the assimilations.

Conclusion

Implications drawn from the findings of this study are, firstly, that a tighter bounding between the students studying the cross-boundary programmes would promote cross-cultural understandings and learning experiences. In addition to academic knowledge, there is a need to promote and nurture mutual acceptance amongst the students. Furthermore, the students' sense of belonging and identity to the cross-boundary programmes are yet to be enhanced to minimise the cultural differences. Last but not least, given the small number of participants, future research should include a larger sample size from different programmes offered by different institutions for comparison; in particular that further study should focus on programmes at bachelor level to provide comprehensive data for multi-dimensional analysis to generate insights and advance theories.

To conclude, this study relates the concepts of globalisation and localisation, attachment and detachment, exile, diasporic experiences, identity and sense of belonging to the study of cross-boundary programmes. Results of the study also shows that, to cope with the cultural differences to re-generate identity and sense of belonging, students will turn themselves into converts or believers, actively demonstrate their commitment to the values and customs of their new land so as to assimilate the individual “I” into the collective “We”. To put it in a nutshell, the accommodation, assimilation and resistance to the new are forms of self-regulations and struggles of which self-actualisation, nautraulisation and mutual acceptance begin; and in our views, this is the most valuable lesson learnt from any cross-boundary and transnational education programmes.

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