A Qualitative Study of the Leadership Practices of Repatriated US-Educated Chinese Organizational Leaders

Maria L. Martinez, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, United States

Abstract
The number of students participating in international education has continuously increased. Over the past six years, mainland China, in particular, has been sending the greatest number of international students to the United States. There is a limited amount of research conducted on the impact of international education on the Chinese as professionals in China. This paper discusses the findings of a qualitative study conducted as part of the requirements of a doctoral program.

This grounded theory methodology study was conducted in mainland China to understand how the merging of the East and West through international education affects human beings and social systems across the world. This study explored the leadership practices of US-educated Chinese organizational leaders. Research participants included professionals in various sectors, such as higher education, finance, trade, and entertainment. Findings from this study included the multi-dimensional educational experiences of the Chinese students, many of whom at the time of their study abroad program, had not previously been outside their country. These experiential learning outcomes were linked to certain organizational behaviors in these repatriated international students reflecting authentic cross-cultural leadership. In contrast to transaction-based cross-cultural code switching, the participants of this study exhibited unique bridging behaviors that indicated a more transformational direction.

Keywords: Chinese, culture, international, education, leadership

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Introduction

The number of students from East Asia attending universities in the United States has continuously increased for the past four decades, particularly Chinese nationals from mainland China. Mainland Chinese students comprise a third of the international student population in the country. Growth in international education participation has spurred interest in understanding the experiences of these students while studying abroad. Studies (Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac, & Elsayed, 2013) show that, given the significant differences in the culture, political inclinations, and educational background between East Asian international students and their Western hosts, engaging in international education for these students involve acculturation and acculturative stress. Despite this challenge, their attendance in American higher education has continued.

My administrative position in a state university in the United States provides me with insight into the international student experience, and in particular, how international students navigate the significantly different educational system in the university. Unlike domestic students who reconnect with their alma mater at some point, it is typical that contact with international students is lost once they leave the country. Complexities associated with transnational studies make it difficult to conduct studies on this population, explaining the dearth of information about the post-graduation lives of East Asian students. To a degree, this study fills the gap in knowledge about this human experience and provides valuable insight into the role that participation in international education plays in the professional lives of Chinese nationals back home.

Literature Review

Transformational Leadership

The leadership field offers numerous definitions of leadership and suggests even more personal traits (Gill, 2011) associated with leadership. Given the focus of this research study, this paper primarily discusses the literature on transformational and global leadership and the cultural dimensions that shape leadership practices in multicultural settings. Transformational leadership, as compared to laissez-faire and transactional leadership, is preferred in multicultural settings because it can use "a combination of skills and unique worldviews that combine to allow leaders the flexibility to create new conditions . . . that would not have emerged otherwise" (Evans, 2009, p. 24).

The focus of transformational leadership is on positively influencing organizational members through empowerment, motivation, and morality. At the heart of the practice of transformational leadership is the professional development of the members. According to Bass (1997), this leadership practice involves the use of any of the four "I" components of transformational leadership: individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation (leaders provide vision and encouragement), and idealized influence. In individualized consideration, the leader attends to the individual member's needs and wishes the member to become a future leader rather than continue being a dependent follower. In intellectual stimulation, the

leader's act to incite the member to think about issues brings about new perspectives rather than "feed on the ignorance of followers" (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 188). Inspirational motivation involves visioning and encouraging members. An inspirational leader focuses on what is the best in people instead of allowing the worst in people--insecurities, danger, confusion, or conflict—negatively impact the work of the organization. By being inspirational, the leader propels members toward action and positive change to achieve a common goal. Lastly, idealized influence focuses on building trust, purpose, and showing conviction. Transformational leaders promote brotherhood rather than individual differences between members (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Transformational leadership is social influence predicated on "openness, connectedness, empowerment, humility and humanity" (Gill, 2011, p. 89).

The cultural relativities that surround leaders across the globe increase the importance of the leader's moral character, motivation, values, and agenda. When values and interests differ, a leader can either strive to respect and work with the differences, or use authority and create a mandate. Egoism versus altruism defines the leader's moral intention; the benefit and cost to self or to others of the leader's actions define the moral consequences of the leadership practice (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Motivating members "to work for transcendental goals that go beyond immediate self-interests . . . for the good of the group, organization, or country" (Bass, 1997, p. 133) reflects an authentic transformational leadership. Leadership which is predicated on self-promotion is inauthentic.

Transformational leaders possess the following: (1) vision of a compelling future, (2) commitment to this future, (3) energy and inspiration, (4) high-performance goals, and (5) action-inspiring team spirit (Evans, 2009). "When we create a vision of a more desirable state, we next must take the action to do something different than we have done up until now" (Evans, 2009, p. 91). The leader displays a sense of direction, shows the energy to follow that direction, and enjoys the pursuit of this goal. To lead the membership to achieving high-performance goals requires the leader to provide guidelines and team spirit. Collaboration, trust, and emotionally non-threatening channels of communication must exist to enable teams to work cohesively toward the same vision.

Key to the study of cross-cultural leadership is the recognition that values is an element of leadership. Existing within individuals and collectives, values often differ along cultural lines. Values are concerned with people's belief systems, cultural identity, ideas, and intrinsically desirable behaviors (Fua, 2009). They reflect the standards of conduct that are acceptable to one's self and society (Rokeach, 1973). Vasquez, Keltner, Ebenbach, & Banaszynski's study (2001) provides the following example: Americans value autonomy much more than community and divinity whereas non-Westerners weigh these three values equally.

As it relates to this study, Farh and Cheng's (2000) study on paternalistic leadership of the Chinese indicates good moral character as a key ingredient of moral leadership. Juxtaposed with Vasquez et al.'s (2001) findings indicating that values differ across cultures, it is reasonable to imagine that what constitutes good moral character varies

between cultures. "The relationship of culture with the values held by human beings underscores the point of this study. That is, there is a question about the universality of the Western thought" (Martinez, 2016, p. 16).

Global Leadership

The proliferation of multinational corporations in the 1990s precipitated discussions concerning what type of leader could effectively lead across substantial physical boundaries and cultural differences. It is from this inquiry that the concept of global leadership emerged. Global leadership as a discipline that deals with the intercultural dimensions of leadership tackles the question of the role that culture plays, and the value sets associated with this culture, in the practice of leading organizations. Scholars such as Alon and Higgins (2005), Bucher and Poutsma (2010), Creque and Gooden (2011), Levy, Beechler, Taylor, and Boyacigiller (2007), and Mendenhall et al. (2013) have contributed to the global leadership field various definitions of the 'global leader' concept. Global leader is an individual "who inspires a group of people to willingly pursue a positive vision in an effectively organized fashion . . . in a context characterized by significant levels of complexity, flow, and presence" (Mendenhall et al., 2013, p.75). This definition of a global leader is an example of a sensitizing concept (Charmaz, 2014) associated with grounded theory research studies.

Mendenhall et al. (2013) also identified fifteen global leadership competencies, nested under the following three main categories: Business and Organizational Acumen; Managing People and Relationships; and Managing Self. These competencies enable global leaders to recognize the multiplicity of perspectives and styles of operation and handle the complexities that come with working with other cultures, geography, or time zones (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Ng et al., 2009). This mindset enables global leaders to work effectively in multicultural settings. They have the ability to adjust their ways to fit the environment of their international constituents (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Bucher & Poutsma, 2010; Creque & Gooden, 2011; Levy, Beechler, Taylor, & Boyacigiller, 2007).

Key to the global leader's ability to lead across cultures are two forms of intelligence: cultural and social. Cultural intelligence is "an outsider's ability to interpret unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures the way that person's compatriots would" (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004, p. 140). Cultural intelligence equips global leaders with the "capability to function effectively in culturally diverse contexts" (Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2009, p. 512). Cultural intelligence complements social intelligence (Gill, 2011) by equipping the global leader the social awareness required to empathize with others and the ability to "sense the shared values and priorities that can guide the group" (Goleman, Goyatzis, & McKee, 2002, p. 49). In combination, these two forms of intelligence enable the global leader to work cross culturally.

Cultural Dimensions of Leadership

Being a global leader is tantamount to recognizing the important role of culture in leading organizations. Culture has been conceptualized as a "collective mental programming" shared by a group (Hofstede, 1980, p. 43) consisting of the following six dimensions along which nations may differ (Hofstede, 1980; 2010).

- Individualism versus collectivism – reflects whether members of the society consider themselves as individuals or operate within a group
- Uncertainty avoidance– reflects the degree of discomfort felt by members of the society with regards to uncertainty and ambiguity
- Masculinity versus femininity – reflects the orientation toward competition and degree of assertiveness as opposed to cooperation and modest and caring ways
- Long-term versus short term orientation – reflects the orientation toward thrift and investing in the future versus a desire for quick results
- Power Distance – reflects the degree to which followers accept and expect power to be unequally distributed
- Indulgence versus Restraint – reflects the society's orientation toward enjoyment and gratification of basic natural human needs as opposed to following strict social norms

Although criticized for oversimplifying a complex social phenomenon that changes over time (Collard 2009), these dimensions provide a path to understanding leadership within the context of the Chinese culture. Constructed using an online tool, Figure 1 shows a comparison between the Chinese and American cultures; the former represents the home culture of international students and the latter represents their study abroad environment.
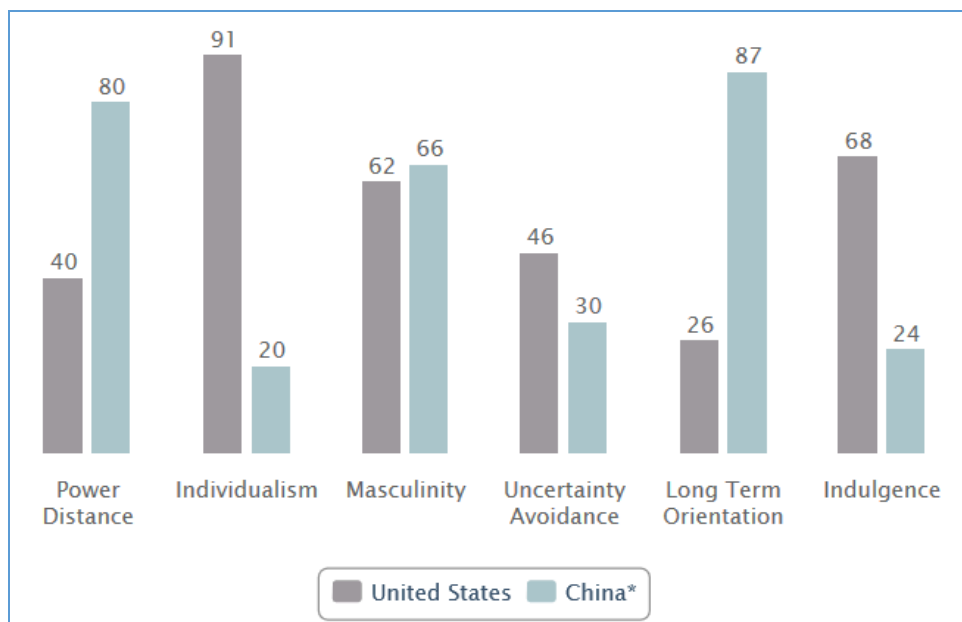

Figure 1 (retrieved from http://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html)

There is some information about the Chinese perspective on leadership through the work of some scholars (Gao, Arnulf, & Kristoffersen, 2011). Gao et al.'s (2011) study demonstrates the relationship between culture and leadership, which lends support to Chen and An's (2009) Chinese Model of Leadership Competence. This culture-specific leadership model considers self-cultivation, context profundity, and action dexterity as constituting Chinese leadership competence. "Self-cultivation is a process of transforming . . . to the higher level of the developmental ladder of leadership competence (Chen & An, 2009, p. 200). From this definition of Chinese leadership, we can see some similarities between the process of becoming a Chinese leader and the process of development of the Western leader.

Methodology

This qualitative study followed the grounded theory methodology and adhered to the principles of culturally responsive. The co-researcher approach was also incorporated in conducting this study. As an in-country study, several of the researcher's colleagues acted as co-researchers that provided logistic and cultural support and enhanced the researcher's credibility and trustworthiness with the participants.

Data Collection

This study had 24 participants. They were US-educated Chinese nationals who had returned to China after completing their graduate programs. Participants were employed in various sectors, including finance, higher education, and trade. Their ages ranged between 24 and 50 years. They were located in various cities along the eastern region of China.

Each participant provided consent to be interviewed and have their interviews audio recorded. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in five cities over a three-week period. Twenty interviews were face-to-face; three were telephonic; and one was via email. The researcher transcribed the recordings. After initial data analysis, seven participants were asked follow-up questions via email.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study followed the social constructivist approach (CGT). This approach allowed the researcher to uncover tacit meanings behind participants' utterances, situation, and events with the aim of understanding their lived experiences of leadership. Additionally, this approach put the focus on the intercultural context of the study which culturally responsive methodology studies require, including the nuances in the use of English as a second-language. Data analysis for this grounded theory study involved several iterations of open coding (1200+ codes) and focused coding (67 codes). The final stage of coding involved categorical coding which led to the classification of this study's findings into three themes.

Discussion

The findings of this study revolved around three major themes: (1) the learning experiences of the participants in the United States; (2) the participants' environment in China; and (3) the link between their international education and their organizational behaviors in China. The following passage from one of the participants reflected the motivation and learning outcome of the Chinese nationals from their international education in the United States.

> The point of international education is not about knowledge but to let people experience different things so people understand and build their awareness that people think in different ways and people behave in different ways (Marvin, personal communication, August 14, 2015).

The Learning Experiences in the United States

The great majority of the Chinese participants had not been outside China prior to going abroad to study. As such, their motivation for going to school abroad was to learn about the world outside China. During their sojourn, they were constantly comparing the Chinese systems with those in their host society—education, transportation, residential rules, and social norms. Inside and outside the classroom, they were challenged with new ways of thinking and behaving. The returnees felt that their international education experience expanded their abilities to think and behave beyond the traditional Chinese ways. In terms of social relations, they realized the concept of the 'other' and learned how to engage in group work in school. Behavioral development was manifested in their learning how to speak up to share their thoughts and taking the initiative to research information on their own. The vast majority of the participants described themselves as "open-minded" and more confident as a result of their experiences abroad. In sum, they were exposed to diverse opinions, interests, styles, and options.

The organizational context in China

The skill set of the returnees enabled them to obtain employment in multinational corporations, state-owned enterprises in China that conducted business with foreign entities, and highly-ranked state universities with international programs. This study found that the degree of application of international education was based on the social norms prevalent in the organization in which the returnees worked. Based on the participants' statements, this study found that multinational corporations (MNC) conducting business with non-Chinese organizations provide an environment that fosters and tolerates the use of Western skill sets. In MNC organizations, returnees reported that they could apply the Western knowledge and cultural intelligence they acquired through their international education. In comparison, returnees employed in state-owned organizations (SOE) had much less opportunities to use their Western skill set. In SOE's, opportunities to use their Western skill set arose only when they needed to interact with foreign nationals or had business transactions with MNC

organizations. Returnees in SOE's who was primarily dealing with the domestic market could hardly apply their international education.

This study found varying degrees of application of Western skill set in higher education in mainland China. Returnees working in universities associated with Western universities had Western leadership style, Western pedagogy, and adopted Western social norms. Similarly but to a lesser extent, those teaching in top-ranking Chinese universities adopted Western pedagogies. The leadership style of administrators in these prestigious Chinese state universities showed elements of inclusive leadership. In comparison, US-educated faculty in provincial universities and colleges reported to have limited ability to use Western pedagogy and were subject to criticism for deviating from the norm; they were expected to use traditional Chinese teaching methods.

This study included two returnees who were entrepreneurs. As independent businesspeople in China, these returnees did not have organizational links to MNCs, SOE's or the Chinese government. Their lifestyles revealed the unique situation of US-educated returnees that did not belong to any established organization in China. They appeared to struggle professionally. This particular finding was consistent with how a current international student described the plight of some returnees during an informal pre-dissertation conversation.

Linking International Education and Organizational Behaviors in China

This study found that, as a context for organizational behavior, the type of organization in which they worked shaped the Chinese returnees' leadership practices. Their employers were either multi-national organizations (MNC), state-owned enterprises (SOE), or state universities. International trading companies or banks based in the United States or other Asian countries and joint US-China universities were examples of MNC's in which the participants worked. The SOE's in which the participants of this study worked were either involved in international or domestic trade. The state universities wherein some of the participants worked were located in either metropolitan cities or provinces.

These findings on organizational behavior circled around the returnees' communication and leadership practices. Keeping in mind that the type of organization they led shaped their manner of operation, how they communicated as leaders was also context-based. In terms of communication, Chinese returnees who worked in MNC's or top-ranking state universities found more opportunities to converse in the English language than returnees who worked in organizations primarily involved in domestic ventures. In terms of style, returnees in MNC's where Western mindset prevailed, they spoke in the more straightforward manner they learned to adopt abroad. In MNC's, these returnees' use of Western communication style enabled them effectively conduct business with international stakeholders.

In terms of leadership, this study's findings indicated that the US-educated Chinese executives were more likely to adopt Western leadership practices. They described

themselves to be more collaborative and stated that they valued multiplicity of perspectives. Their orientation was toward less or flatter organizational hierarchy and believed in professional development for their staff. Participants in the MNC's and higher education institutions reported that they provided mentoring to their staff.

Similarly, the leadership practice of returnee-leaders in SOE's reflected inclusive leadership. They encouraged staff to engage in brainstorming activities and led constructive dialogue with them. In the SOE's where traditional Chinese social norms prevailed, returnees used familiar Chinese communication techniques to apply Western style social relations. For example, they would not make explicit recommendations or provide direct feedback to co-workers or subordinates. Rather, they used subtle ways to make suggestions for other ways of operating and influencing positive change. This was how they blended Western leadership practices and the Chinese culture.

"I'm a bridger."

In its final analysis, this study linked the behavior of the returnees with their learning experiences in the United States. This analysis revolved around the self-definition made by one of the participants, a human resource professional for a multinational corporation. Adopted as an in vivo code, "I'm a bridger" gave birth to the *bridger* concept to describe the leadership practices of US-educated Chinese nationals in mainland China. Becoming a bridger as a form of cross-cultural learning could be traced back to the challenges in social relations that this returnee and the other participants encountered while abroad. This learning, as Rientes and Jindal-Snape (2015) suggested, led to the development of coping skills while during their sojourn, which later evolved into bridge building behaviors. The following two examples of coping skills were provided by this study: (1) a higher education administrator in a joint US-China university learned how to work with individuals with diverse values and (2) a manager in a multinational organization learned how to work with teams. Serving as intercultural interpersonal tools, these skills enabled the returnees to take up an adaptive social behavior in multicultural settings.

Bridging behaviors are actions that reflect one's ability to link perspectives and behaviors in accordance with the cultural and social situation. The bridging behavior adopted by US-educated Chinese returnees is akin to Molinsky's (2013) "cultural retooling". Cultural retooling occurs during one's sojourn away from home while bridging behaviors arise during repatriation. In the case of the Chinese returnees, bridging behaviors facilitate relationship-building between peoples of Eastern and Western cultures. Consistent with the Confucian orientation, the Chinese are motivated by their need to maintain harmony—the ying and the yang--in social relationships and understanding between cultures. Coupled with cultural intelligence that developed as a result of their international education, bridger-returnees are able to function well in multicultural settings. Their expanded knowledge about the West reflects cultural intelligence (CQ) in the cognitive dimension while their increased ease in engaging with Western society lies in the behavioral and motivational dimensions of CQ.

The bridger's adaptive nature is akin to cross-cultural code switching behavior, another concept advanced by Molinsky (2007), but is distinct in its underlying principle of permanently building healthy social relations. The bridger's goal is to accept and understand the other as they are as human beings and similarly, to be accepted as well. Predicated on creating permanent improvements in social relations, I argue that bridgers are transformational and code switchers are more transactional, thus making the latter less of an authentic leader than the former (Bass & Avolio, 1997).

Development of Empathy—A Chinese Leadership Competence

Observations of how complete strangers welcomed them, provided them physical assistance, and helped them overcome their struggles while studying abroad were lessons about empathy for the Chinese student. The Chinese international students became familiar with the neighborly smiles and casual 'hellos' from strangers and were grateful for acts of kindness from faculty or community members. This social behavior was in stark contrast with the closed social networks in China, known as *guanxi* in Chinese, where social interaction and information sharing was limited to those accepted into specific social groups. From their pleasant experiences in their host country, Chinese international students developed the concept of the other and sensitivity to differences in people's perspectives, needs, and ways of being. Most importantly, they developed empathy for those dissimilar to them, because in the United States, they were the foreigners. Empathy, combined with group work experiences in the United States, developed their potential for intercultural facilitative behavior. From their perspective, these international students were developing empathy--the key competence of a Chinese leader (Chen & An, 2009).

Theoretical Propositions from this Study

Theoretical sampling was conducted during the data analysis phase of this study to propel the study toward theory construction. Theories that informed this study's emergent theory included the Model of Chinese Leadership (Chen & An, 2009) and Molinksy's (2007) theory on cross-cultural code switching. The Chinese Model guided this study's understanding of the leadership styles of the participants by providing the ingredients of Chinese leadership: self-cultivation, context profundity, and action dexterity (Chen & An, 2009). The "umbrella of 'great empathy,' which dictates [that] the unity is integrated with diversities, and particularly is identified with universality" (Chen & An, 2009, pp. 200-201) resulted in the conception that development of leadership for the Chinese is a process that involved transformation through self-cultivation.

From the behavioral perspective, Molinsky's (2007) theory on cross-cultural code switching provided a starting point for this study's explanation of the behaviors of the Chinese returnees. Premised upon the need of foreigners to adjust their behavior when conducting business with other cultures, code switching as the "act of purposefully modifying one's behavior . . . to accommodate different cultural norms for appropriate behavior (Molinsky, 2007, p. 623) helped explain the returnees'

behaviors. In its common link to empathy, cross-cultural code-switching conceptually connected with the bridging behavior from this perspective: In order for any behavioral adjustment to be authentic and be congruent with the person's emotional makeup, the action must be based on the person's understanding of the perspective of the other person. As this study showed, the Chinese returnees were capable of cross-cultural code-switching because they learned the concept of the other and were authentically striving for a harmonious relationship with other cultures. This orientation toward empathetic interactions connected back to the Chinese model of leadership as well as to the Western concept of empathy which "makes a leader able to get along well with people of diverse backgrounds or from other cultures" (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 255).

Defined as "how leaders handle themselves and their relationships" (Goleman et al., 2002, p.6), emotional intelligence which includes empathy, enabled the Chinese returnees to operate successfully in cross-cultural settings. The empathy that they developed as a by-product of their acculturation challenges abroad) increased their emotional intelligence. Growth in this area represented the greatest benefit of participation in international education. Because of their experiences as international students, US-educated Chinese returnees became facilitators of understanding between the East and the West. On their own, they were promoting positive professional and social relationships between individuals from these diverse cultures. Using communication strategies that would work well for their organizational context, they strived to clarify uncertainties or eliminate possible sources of disagreements due to cultural differences.

Conclusion

This research provides a rare look into the post-graduation lives of international students who have returned home and poses the question of how learning outcomes of international education affect the practice of leadership in the returnees' organizations. The international education community can glean from this study possible ways to develop academic programs and student services that foster authentic leadership. From the proposition that "international students organically take on the role of bridgers" (Martinez, 2016, p. 178) this study sets the stage for future studies on international education and cross-cultural leadership. In addition to its findings about the leadership practices of repatriated international students, this study also paves the way for future studies on how human behaviors and systems across the globe are possible affected by international education.

Implications of this study extend beyond the business sector where the majority of the participants belong. There are implications in international relations, higher education, and existing theories related to cross-cultural phenomena. As with other studies (Biao & Shen, 2009; Li, 2006), this study links educational exchanges with the development of authentic understanding between countries. To foster positive international relations, university and government leaders must invest in programs that provide positive educational experiences to international students participating in their country's higher education. With respect to the Chinese, their participation in

graduate programs in the United States helps develop ambassadors that foster peace and understanding between the two nations.

In the university setting, administrators of career centers may be able to plan programs that facilitate job searches for international students; alumni associations and/or university advancement organizations may be able to enhance their fund raising abilities by developing strategies for outreach to former international students based on this study's findings. Given the continued growth in the number of international students in Western universities, this study suggests heeding Hudzik's (2011) call to incorporate global approaches in pedagogy and student services in university strategic planning.

US-educated Chinese returnees gravitate toward each other in China. They form informal social groups in the Chinese society. Cognizant of their distinctive set of skills and expanded mind set, US-educated (or Western educated) Chinese nationals share with each other a unique value set not shared by their domestically-educated counterparts. The effect that these coalitions have on the Chinese society is worth examining for possible new trends in cross-cultural relations. The study suggests a need for socio-anthropologists and scholars from other disciplines to research this phenomenon and understand the consequences of the internationalization of education.

Although all study participants came from the same country, the theoretical propositions from this study could apply to other nationalities. The study offers a template for other similar studies. It is also recommended that further research on the bridging behavior include other factors, such as number of years of study abroad, length of repatriation, educational background, and socioeconomic status. It would be interesting to see what sorts of future studies this groundbreaking in-country dissertation inspires. I invite other scholars to expand this research and help inform the work of the academics and administrators in higher education worldwide.

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