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by

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Introduction

The Most Hideous Overseas Student

On the evening of Wednesday, April 4, 2008, approximately a dozen members and supporters of the Duke Human Rights Coalition gathered to hold a public vigil in support of Tibetan independence. They were met by an estimated crowd of roughly four hundred Chinese counter-protesters. In a widely viewed video of the incident, the pro-Tibetan demonstrators, mostly Caucasian, stand clustered on the steps of a large stone chapel, displaying a Tibetan flag and various hand-made posters. The Chinese counter-demonstrators stand several hundred feet away, waving Chinese flags, singing the Chinese national anthem, and shouting “I love China.” The video cuts to a new shot that shows members of the two sides arguing with one another. The audio is muffled, but it is possible to make out a few scraps of conversation: a Chinese demonstrator asks a man holding a Tibetan flag “why his people started violence;” the man replies that China should get out of his country; an American student shouts that the Dalai Lama is for peace, while the Chinese government oppresses and lies. The video cuts to another new shot, and the sides have once again separated into distinct camps. This time, they are only about twenty feet apart. In between stands a young Chinese woman, pacing back and forth while she lectures the Chinese protesters in

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1 “Wang qianyuan xianchang shipin [Live Video Wang Qianyuan],” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CBCR3tWQZk; the video is also available on various Chinese video hosting sites.

2 This is likely a reference to a highly publicized anti-Chinese riot that erupted in Lhasa on March 14, 2008. Chinese media reported that no Tibetans and as many as nineteen ethnically Han civilians were killed. Representatives of the Tibetan government in exile claimed that as many as ninety ethnic Tibetans were killed in clashes with Chinese security forces. See Jim Yardley, “Violence in Tibet as Monks Clash With Police,” The New York Times, March 15, 2008.
English. Her voice barely audible over the noise of the crowd, she shouts “just because I’m Chinese doesn’t mean I can’t think for myself.” In a final shot, the same girl argues in Mandarin with a group of middle-aged Chinese men. “Hong Kong has its own flag,” she says, “why shouldn’t Tibet?” Shortly afterward, the girl is escorted away by campus security.

In the wake of the incident, the girl, a twenty-year-old sophomore from Qingdao named Wang Qianyuan, became a minor celebrity. On April 17th, The New York Times published a flattering account of her role in the incident, calling her a “would-be mediator.” In the piece, Adam Weiss, one of the organizers of the pro-Tibet vigil, tells reporter Shaila Dewan that Wang was simply trying to get the two sides to engage in dialogue. At Wang’s behest, Weiss says, he spoke with several leaders of the Chinese contingent, finding that “we could compromise and say we all wanted increased human rights for all Chinese, and especially for Tibetans.”

In an April 18th segment that aired on National Public Radio’s All Things Considered, Wang herself offered a similar take on the incident: “[the two sides] say that they were expressing their opinions, but most of their opinions were really stereotyped. Both sides didn’t really know the whole story. So I wanted them to try to communicate with each other.” In these stories, Wang comes off as a hero, a voice for civil discourse amidst dogmatism and shouting.

Of course, neither the Times nor NPR would have picked up the story in the first place had it not been for the reaction in the Chinese media. Shortly after the

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3 English-language reports refer to her by her English name, Grace Wang.
4 Dewan, “Chinese Student in U.S. is Caught in Confrontation.”
5 Anthony Kuhn, “Tibet Protests Spur Chinese Nationalism,” 0:58.
incident, photos of Wang with the word “traitor (hanjian)” scrawled across her forehead began appearing on influential Chinese blogs and message boards. One characteristically vehement blog post accuses her of “associating with separatist (fenlie fenzi) criminals,” passing out pro-Tibet fliers, writing pro-Tibet slogans and “overtly lifting the flag of Tibet.”

Hundreds of anonymous commenters responded to the post with personal attacks, calling Wang “scum (bailei),” a “traitor to her race (hanjian),” and other insults. Others said they detested her, bemoaning the loss of face she had brought upon China. Some, questioning Wang’s national allegiance, wondered whether or not she was actually a Chinese person (ta daodi shi bu shi zhongguoren?).

In retaliation, a group of self-professed internet vigilantes found and posted Wang’s personal information, including her full name, identification number, and home address. Angry nationalists then vandalized her parents’ apartment, forcing them to go into hiding. Clearly, Chinese netizens did not consider Wang a hero. For them, she was, as the website of China Central Television (CCTV) put it, “the most hideous overseas student (zui choulou de liuxuesheng).”

Wang Qianyuan and the Culturally Situated Meaning of Study Abroad

That Wang was lionized in America and vilified in China points to an important truth about study abroad. On one hand, study abroad is an objective fact. Every year, hundreds of thousands of students from around the world study in countries other than their own. According to the Institute of International Education

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6 For this and other insults directed at Wang, see “Wang Qianyuan shijian wanquanban.”
(IIE), 8 623,805 international students studied in the US alone during the 2007/8 academic year. 9 Of these, 80,000 came from mainland China, second only to India among sending countries. 10 By virtue of sheer numbers, mainland Chinese students have become a highly visible presence on American college and university campuses. Even as a student at a small, liberal arts college in Massachusetts, I rarely go more than a day without overhearing a conversation between native Mandarin speakers. While working at Columbia University one summer, I rarely went more than an hour.

Although study abroad is an objective fact, the meaning and purpose of study abroad are socially constructed. All overseas students 11 choose to go abroad for a reason. If they did not think study abroad was worthwhile, they would simply stay home. However, the perceived value of study abroad varies greatly from place to place. I learned this lesson as a seventeen-year-old exchange student living in Thailand. My first day there, my host parents asked me why I wanted to study abroad. I told them I was looking for an adventure, and that I thought living in a different culture would make me a better person. They paused for a second, looking slightly confused, and then moved on to another question. Only later did I realize how ridiculous my answer must have sounded. In the eyes of Thai parents, I found out,

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8 A non-profit organization that monitors the flow of international students to and from the US. Consequently, the IIE is also responsible for administering the Fulbright scholarship program.
9 Institute For International Education, "Open Doors 2008 'Fast Facts.'"
10 Ibid.
11 Throughout, I have translated the Chinese term liuxuesheng as "overseas student," rather than the more standard American English "exchange student." As I will demonstrate, the practice of study abroad in China is very different from America. Chinese liuxuesheng are not "exchange students" in the sense that they spend a semester or two abroad and then return to China to complete their education. Most enroll in full degree programs, spending several years in America. To make this distinction clear, I chose to use the term "overseas student" instead.
study abroad is a highly coveted stepping stone to socio-economic success. An undergraduate student who speaks English well, my host father once insisted, can get a better-paying job than a person with a Ph.D. Because of this perception, middle class Thai parents sink vast amounts of time and money into preparing their children for highly selective study abroad entrance examinations. In contrast, before I left the US, most people simply shrugged when I told them about my plan to study abroad. The application process consisted of writing a short essay, paying a fee, and demonstrating I could maintain a C average. As this brief example demonstrates, study abroad is not a fixed, stable category of experience. This helps explain why Wang was praised in America and attacked in China. The American reporters who lionized her and the Chinese netizens who labeled her a traitor were operating on very different assumptions about the meaning and purpose of study abroad.

To understand these differences, it is necessary to examine Chinese and American discourses on study abroad. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault famously argued that “sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover.”12 That is, the idea that sexuality is a “positive, distinct, and constitutive feature of the human personality” is a social construct. The Ancient Greeks, for instance, had no concept of an individual sexual identity rooted in gender preference.13 The notion of sexuality as we know it today, Foucault argued, developed only during the nineteenth century, when medical, scientific and legal discourses began encouraging people to “confess” their sexual transgressions. In the act of confessing,

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they posited the existence of an essential sexual nature, “the determinate source from which all sexual expression proceeds.”\textsuperscript{14} Though somewhat less exciting, a similar process has occurred in the case of study abroad. In and of itself, study abroad simply means to study outside one’s own country. However, as the above example illustrates, people also view study abroad as a form of experiential and socio-economic capital.

To paraphrase David Halperin, this represents the appropriation of a bodily practice by an ideological discourse. That is, when educators, government officials and overseas students talk about study abroad, they inscribe it with subjective, culturally specific meaning. In doing so, they condition people to expect a certain type of behavior from overseas students.

**Study Abroad in America**

In America, popular discourse constructs study abroad as an internationalist project. The website of American Field Services (AFS), a non-profit organization that coordinates international exchange programs, prominently displays several “benefits of intercultural study.” They include: “find out something new about your own culture and point of view by seeing it from a fresh perspective; gain a real understanding of another country and its culture and society; and feel confident and comfortable with people from other cultures.”\textsuperscript{15} However, AFS materials also suggest that the “benefits of intercultural study” accrue to more than just individual students. According to their mission statement, AFS “provides intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to create a more just and

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} American Field Services, “Benefits of Intercultural Study.”
peaceful world.”

With their increased cultural fluency, this implies, overseas students promote intercultural understanding and cooperation.

To become a cultural mediator, the discourse on study abroad suggests, overseas students must actively engage with difference. In 1986, Canadian poet Karen Connelly spent a year living and studying in rural Thailand. Seven years later, she published *Dream of a Thousand Lives*, a memoir of the experience. At first, Connelly describes the sensation of feeling lost, wondering why she gave up her comfortable life in Canada. Later, she reminds herself that “I came here to live and learn in a new culture, to adapt myself to a country very distinct from my own.”

Over the course of a year, she tries her best to integrate into Thai society, forming strong, lasting friendships with her host family and friends. By the time of her departure, she wonders: “Can Canada even exist? The center of the world is this little town.” This constructs study abroad as a journey of personal transformation predicated on adaptation to the host culture. In the author’s preface, however, Connelly ascribes broader significance to study abroad. In addition to fostering personal growth, she suggests, study abroad also makes overseas students more conscientious global citizens. As a result of living in Thailand, she writes:

> I now conceive of travel, and more particularly of living abroad, as responsibility, neither a right nor a privilege, but a profoundly human act. To slow down, to listen more carefully... to learn from people who know well what we do not know at all: these are choices, steps toward

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16 American Field Services, “What We Do.”

17 Although Connelly is technically Canadian, her book was published in the US in 2001 with a special preface addressed to American readers. Thus, I believe it merits inclusion in this discussion of the American discourse on study abroad.


19 Ibid., 203
dismantling the barriers that separate not only nations and strangers, but neighbors, too.\textsuperscript{20}

In this formulation, it is the experience of difference that transforms overseas students into cultural mediators. For Connelly, engaging with difference is not just a minor nuisance associated with study abroad, but the reason to pursue study abroad in the first place.

Given this view, the American discourse on study abroad posits integration as the short-term objective of overseas students. The “Williams College Guide to Study Away,” for instance, advises American students living abroad to avoid spending time around other Americans. “The less time you spend with Americans,” the author of the guide suggests, “the faster you’ll feel comfortable in your host country.”\textsuperscript{21} In her view, integration into the host culture is not just a practical strategy for managing culture shock, but a valuable goal in and of itself: “For most of us, there’s really nothing more important to an overseas experience than reaching out to others and integrating oneself into one’s host culture. Breaking out of your safe, secure world…will undoubtedly be the most enlightening and rewarding part of your stay abroad.”\textsuperscript{22} This suggests that only students who engage with new people and ideas will realize the benefits of study abroad, both personal and global.

\textbf{Wang Qianyuan Reconsidered}

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 29.
In light of this discourse, it is not surprising that the American media
would lionize Wang Qianyuan. Video of the Duke incident shows the Chinese
protesters gathered en masse, chanting in Chinese and waving symbols of the
Chinese state. In arguments, they re-iterate the official position of the Chinese
government, insisting that Tibet has been and always will be an indivisible part
of China. To an American observer, they look extremely “Chinese.” Wang,
meanwhile, comes otf as an assimilated cosmopolitan.23 In the video, she
speaks English and Chinese, signaling her ability to communicate with both
sides. Though it is unclear whether or not she supports Tibetan independence,
she clearly does not categorically reject the American students’ point of view.
This apparent willingness to identify with both sides of the issue positions
Wang as a potential mediator. Her physical location, standing between the
Chinese and American camps, encourages this perception visually.24 From an
American perspective, Wang was doing exactly what an overseas student
should do.

Obviously, the people who attacked her must have held very different
assumptions about the meaning and purpose of study abroad. Otherwise, they
would not have branded her a traitor, threatened to burn her in oil, or dumped a
bucket of feces on the steps of her parents’ apartment. An article by the

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23 For an in depth discussion of this term and its use in the Chinese discourse on study
abroad, see Wen, Rethinking Cultural Translation, 31-50
24 The Times article’s construction of Wang as a middleman is particularly striking.
Dewan writes: “When Ms. Wang encountered the two demonstrations last week, the
Chinese students seemed to expect her to join them, she said. But she hesitated. ‘They
were really shocked to see that I was deciding, because the Chinese side thought that I
shouldn’t even decide at all,’ she said. ‘In the end, I decided not to be on either side,
because they were to extreme.’”
blogger “liujiaun1054” titled “What Kind of Person is Wang Qianyuan After All” states these assumptions fairly succinctly. Liu writes that when it comes to matters of national importance, all reasonable Chinese people naturally fight for the interests of China. “No matter where you go,” he argues, “you are a Chinese person, you need to be clear that the good of your motherland is more important than anything else.” Thus, “in my imagination, overseas students are all patriots. They will all courageously stand up against behavior that damages their motherland.” Because Wang “not only failed to fight for her country, but also aided those who oppose China,” she was not worthy of being a Chinese person. For Liu, the Wang Qianyuan incident is so troubling that it leads him to question the value of study abroad: “[study abroad] used to be able to produce talented people who returned home to develop China, but now it threatens the country. No matter how formidable [Wang’s] personal abilities are, she still has a negative impact on China.” Strong rhetoric aside, this post reveals a key distinction between Chinese and American perspectives on study abroad. Unlike Americans, who see study abroad as an internationalist project, most Chinese people see study abroad as a tool for strengthening China. To them, overseas students are supposed to be national strengtheners, not cultural mediators. While strengthening China may entail engaging with

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25 Liujiakun1054, “What Kind of Person is Wang Qianyuan After All.”
26 To speak of “Chinese” and “American” perspectives on study abroad is admittedly an imperfect generalization. Participants in the Chinese discourse on study abroad represent only a narrow section of the Chinese population as a whole, upper middle class urban residents. And as I will demonstrate in chapter three, the meaning of “Chinese” itself is highly contested. Nonetheless, I feel that the widespread differences between the view of study abroad on display in works written in Chinese for a Chinese audience and English for an American audience merit comparison.
difference, gaining cultural fluency and fostering intercultural communication, overseas students must not lose sight of their ultimate objective.

Given this view of study abroad, it is easier to understand why Wang Qianyuan became an object of scorn in China. In the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, the context in which the Duke incident occurred, the Chinese government repeatedly stressed a need for unity on controversial issues like Tibet. If the Chinese people did not stand together, the government warned, it would provide an opening for anti-Chinese forces looking to sabotage the Olympics, resulting in a massive loss of face for China on the international stage. Thus, in the eyes of Chinese observers, even if Wang was only advocating dialogue, by breaking rank on the issue of Tibet, she was effectively damaging China’s national interest. If the goal of study abroad is to strengthen China, then Wang truly was “the most hideous overseas student.”

Overseas Student Authors and the Discourse on Study Abroad

This leaves the vexing question of why Chinese people, unlike Americans, view study abroad as a national project. A tempting answer is that they have been “brainwashed” by the government. As the Wang Qianyuan incident illustrates, the perception that study abroad is a national project can silence overseas students who voice dissent, removing a potential source of instability. Thus, it would seem to behoove the state to encourage this perception. While state discourse does play an important role in linking study abroad to national development, attributing the contemporary Chinese view of
study abroad to mere brainwashing is insufficient. Consider that when Wang Qianyuan questioned the Chinese government’s stance on Tibet, critics speculated that she had been brainwashed by Tibetan separatists. Others claimed that her participation in the incident had been orchestrated by the CIA. Attributing Wang’s actions to outside influence ruled out the possibility that she acted of her own accord, discouraging consideration of the merits of her position. Similarly, the notion that state discourse imposes a particular view of study abroad on the Chinese people robs overseas students of their individual agency, short-circuiting attempts to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of Chinese nationalism.

In the following three chapters, I will argue that overseas students themselves participate in the construction of study abroad as a national project. They do not simply react to expectations imposed by official discourse, but actively and willingly cast themselves as national strengtheners. Although they choose to go abroad for private reasons, in their writings, they posit a desire and ability to strengthen China. This reifies the notion that national development is the ultimate goal of study abroad.

In chapter one, I will examine the historical antecedents of the contemporary discourse on study abroad.27 I will begin by suggesting that the Chinese state has always had an ambivalent attitude study abroad. Prior to the

27 Since the beginning of the study abroad movement, Chinese students have gone to a variety of different countries. During the nineteenth century, the majority of overseas students went to Japan. In recent years, Australia and New Zealand have become increasingly popular destinations for Chinese students. In this thesis, however, I will focus only on the discourse on study abroad to the US.
1920’s, state legitimacy was rooted in adherence to Confucian principle. Because overseas students seemingly abandoned these principles, their political loyalty came under suspicion. At the time, restrictive immigration policies ensured that overseas students would have to return to China after graduation. Since they would ultimately be living in China, they needed to position themselves as acceptable Chinese subjects. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century overseas student authors like Yung Wing and Hu Shi did so by constructing themselves as national strengtheners. In *My Life in China and America*, Wing, the first Chinese graduate of an ivy league university, uses his educational background to spearhead various modernization projects, including the establishment of a permanent education mission in the US. Hu’s writings, meanwhile, encourage cultural reform, arguing that China would grow stronger if Chinese people adopted American values like independence and self-reliance. These discursive strategies helped decouple Chinese identity from Confucianism, paving the way for the emergence of modern Chinese nationalism.

In the second half of chapter one, I will look at the post-1979 discourse on study abroad. During the Maoist era, the flow of Chinese students to America virtually stopped. By the time study abroad resumed in 1979, changes in US immigration policy made it so that overseas students were no longer legally obligated to return to China after graduation. Disillusionment resulting from the Cultural Revolution coupled with a perceived lack of employment opportunities in China encouraged many overseas students to remain in
America. Since they no longer lived or worked in China, they had less reason to demonstrate their loyalty to the Chinese state. As such, during the 1980’s, overseas student authors like Zha Jianying began questioning the assumed link between study abroad and national development. By the early 1990’s, however, China’s military and economic star was on the rise. The prospect of social and economic advancement once again gave overseas student authors reason to affirm their patriotism. Zhou Li, for instance, author of the influential *A Chinese Woman in Manhattan*, used her tale of capitalist success in America as a vehicle for social commentary on China. Journalist and former overseas student Qian Ning, meanwhile, insisted that all overseas students had a responsibility to strengthen China, regardless of why they chose to pursue study abroad. These tactics signaled to Party officials that overseas students did not pose a threat to state authority.

Chapters two and three examine the contemporary discourse on study abroad, focusing on three overseas student memoirs published in the past decade: Liu Yiting’s *Harvard Girl*, Tian Ye’s *Harvard Boy* and Feng Jianmei’s *Yale’s Spirit*. In chapter two, I will argue that, like previous generations of overseas student authors, Liu, Feng and Tian construct study abroad as a national project. Given the transnational character of study abroad, the spread of global capitalism and the precarious ideological position of the Communist Party, overseas students represent a significant threat to the status

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28 Most of *Harvard Girl* was written by Liu’s parents. However, the chapter on which I will mainly focus was written by Liu herself. Thus, for the purposes of my discussion, I will treat Liu as the book’s author.
In *Harvard Boy*, Tian Ye embraces the more threatening aspects of study abroad, subject-making and capital accumulation. In *Harvard Girl* and *Yale’s Spirit*, Liu Yiting and Feng Jianmei do the opposite, using both traditional and non-traditional methods to construct overseas students as loyal national subjects. Like Hu Shi, they position themselves as modernizing intellectuals, proposing spiritual and structural strategies for making China more globally competitive. In a departure from the past, they also cast study abroad as an instance of “education for quality (*suzhi jiaoyu*),” implying that study abroad provides overseas students with the desire and ability to strengthen China. This signals that all overseas students, even those who openly pursue capital accumulation and self-actualization, remain fundamentally committed to the goals of the ruling regime.

In chapter three, I will explore how Liu, Feng and Tian manipulate the discourse on Chinese identity to further construct overseas students as loyal national subjects. While affirming their desire and ability to strengthen China, Liu, Feng and Tian imply that Chinese identity is rooted in cultural practice. Given the advent of electronic communication, the global diffusion of Chinese media, and the rise of official multiculturalism, it is now possible to sustain this form of Chinese identity almost anywhere in the world. However, *Harvard Boy*, *Harvard Girl* and *Yale’s Spirit* also link Chinese identity to the PRC, as both place and political entity. To Chinese readers, this naturalizes political and economic allegiance to the PRC regime. By bolstering the position of the
state, I will argue, overseas student authors gain a free hand to accumulate capital.
Chapter 1: Historical Survey

Introduction

In this chapter, I will trace the historical evolution of the discourse on study abroad. There are two levels at which to examine this discourse, popular and official. Since the mid-nineteenth century, official discourse has constructed study abroad as a national project. Though prevailing notions of “Chinese” have shifted over time, government officials have consistently directed overseas students to acquire knowledge useful for strengthening China while maintaining a Chinese essence. Overseas student authors alternately bolstered and complicated this view of study abroad. When they calculated that it was within their self-interest to comply with official discourse, they adopted the role of national strengthener and manipulated the prevailing discourse on Chinese identity so as to present themselves as loyal Chinese subjects. When they saw no reason to comply with official discourse, they rejected the role of national strengthener and posited a loss of Chinese identity. In choosing to accommodate or resist official discourse, overseas student authors necessarily exercised their individual agency.

Official Discourse on Study Abroad, 1872-1949

Late-Qing and Republican era discourse on study abroad was inextricably tied to the question of national salvation. During the nineteenth century, China suffered a series of embarrassing military defeats at the hands of England and other Western imperial powers. Fearing national extinction, prominent officials began looking for ways to close the military and economic gap between China and the West. While early
efforts focused on the need for "guns and ships," by the 1870's reformers had begun articulating a need for Western "machinery and mathematics." Instead of simply using Western military technology, they claimed, it was important to understand how that technology worked. As the influential reformer Feng Guifen put it, "we must come in the end to the realization that there is nothing at all wrong with manufacturing and maintaining and learning how to use such weapons on our own... Only then can we regain the strength that was ours originally... only then can we become beyond doubt the greatest country in this wide world..." Feng's argument points to a key facet of China's response to imperialism. Prior to the twentieth century, Chinese identity was "culturalist," based in the perception of "common historical heritage and acceptance of shared beliefs." In his historical survey of Chinese nationalism, James Townsend identifies two major aspects of the culturalist model. First, Chinese officials had no concept of a world order composed of formally equal states. They saw China as the one true civilization, and neighbors like Korea, Japan and Vietnam as barbarian vassal states. Second, under the culturalist model, legitimate rule rested on adherence to Confucian principles, and thus was not restricted to people of ethnic Chinese descent. Given these two precepts, Townsend explains, "supreme loyalty attached to the culture itself, not to the state, and there could be no justification for abandoning or even changing the cultural tradition in order to strengthen the state." Faced with the reality of Western military and technological superiority, late-Qing officials

29 Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State*, 73.
30 Ibid.
recognized a need to acquire Western learning. However, in their efforts to strengthen China, they could not abandon Confucian tradition, the very basis of state legitimacy. To resolve this dilemma, they cast modernization as an attempt to save, rather than replace, Chinese culture. In another essay advocating the introduction of Western learning, Feng wrote: “would not the best of all possible stratagems be to retain the social relationships and the illustrious moral principles of China as the foundation, and to reinforce them with the techniques that the various countries [of the West] have used to attain wealth and power?” This view, later reformulated as *zhongxue wei ti, xinxue wei yong* (Chinese learning as the essence, Western learning for practical use) served as the guiding principle of China’s preliminary modernization efforts. Adherents held that Western learning was not valuable in and of itself, but only insofar as it helped preserve cultural China.

During the nineteenth century, official discourse on study abroad reflected the Chinese government’s ambivalent attitude toward Western learning. In 1872, at the behest of Yung Wing, the first Chinese student to receive a degree from an ivy league university, Zeng Guofan, another reformist official, consented to the establishment of the Chinese Educational Mission (CEM). Wing’s plan called for sending 120 Chinese students to America to study military science, navigation, shipbuilding and other subjects relevant to China’s modernization. Upon return, they would report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Zongli Yamen*) to receive official appointments. According to Li Hongzhang, one of Zeng’s disciples, the Qing court agreed to Wing’s proposal “so that after the [students] had completed their study and returned to China

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33 Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State*, 73.
34 Y.C. Wang, *Chinese Intellectuals and the West*, 43.
all the technological specialties of the West may be adopted by China, and the nation may begin to grow strong by its own efforts.”35 While eager to produce technicians capable of strengthening China, conservative court officials worried about the potential side effects of study abroad. Because state legitimacy derived from perceived adherence to Confucian principles, if overseas students were to abandon those principles, they would no longer owe allegiance to the state. To prevent this from happening, the court stipulated that CEM students continue studying the Confucian classics and performing Confucian rituals while abroad. In 1881, after receiving reports that the students were ignoring their Chinese studies, disrespecting their instructors, wearing American-style clothes, converting to Christianity and dating American girls, the court recalled the entire mission. As this example attests, nineteenth century officials promulgated a narrowly circumscribed vision of study abroad. In official discourse, overseas students were to acquire knowledge useful for strengthening China, but in the process maintain a strictly Chinese cultural identity.

Throughout the early twentieth century, official discourse continued to evince a similar attitude toward study abroad. In 1898, the scholar-official Zhang Zhidong published *An Exhortation to Learning*, a monograph on education reform. In it, he argued that “knowledge alone can save us from destruction, and education is the path to knowledge.”36 One way to advance the cause of education, he argued, was study abroad by Chinese students. In the ensuing decades, government officials heeded Zhang’s advice, providing financial and political support for study abroad. Most

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36 Wang, *Intellectuals and the West*, 52.
notably, in 1909, the government used excess money from the Boxer Indemnity Fund to found Qinghua College, a preparatory academy for overseas students. It also established a variety of military and provincial level scholarships, giving even students with little economic means the opportunity to study abroad. To students, these actions indicated that the government considered study abroad a worthwhile pursuit. However, as in the nineteenth century, government officials imposed legal and discursive controls on the practice of study abroad. Legally, they restricted which subjects students could study, which schools they could attend, and how long they could remain abroad. Discursively, officials consistently linked study abroad to the problem of national survival. In 1917, for instance, V.K. Wellington Koo (Gu Weijun), then Chinese minister to the US, wrote an open editorial to the overseas student community:

> China needs us and needs us all; for at this stage of her development, she cannot afford to lose any one of us for any cause, far less through our self-indulgence or self-abandonment. For every returned student thus lost to her...she will be to that extent weakened and handicapped in her work of rehabilitation.  

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37 The Boxer Rebellion (1898-1901) grew out of an anti-Imperialist, anti-foreign secret society based in Shandong. In June of 1900, the Boxers, with the tacit support of the Empress Dowager Cixi, seized a number of foreign legations in Beijing. This prompted a military response from the Imperial powers. The rebellion was eventually suppressed by an allied army of troops from eight different colonial powers, including the US. As punishment, China was made to pay an indemnity equivalent to 6.7 billion US dollars.  
38 Ibid., 58.  
In this formulation, study abroad is a national project. Rather than pursue personal gain, overseas students must remain committed to the goal of strengthening China, the reason they were sent abroad in the first place.\(^{40}\)

**Overseas Student Authors and the Construction of Study Abroad, 1872-1949**

Government officials were not the only participants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century discourse on study abroad. Since the time of Yung Wing, overseas students themselves have frequently written about their experiences. Wing, for example, published *My Life in China and America*, a memoir of his education and post-graduate career. Between 1905 and 1931, hundreds of other overseas students contributed to *The Chinese Students' Monthly*, an English-language magazine published by the Chinese Students’ Alliance. A typical issue contained editorials on political events in China, local chapter news, and stories related to overseas student life in America. Some overseas students, such as Hu Shi, also became celebrated public intellectuals, referencing study abroad in highly public debates on social and cultural reform in China. By writing about their experiences, these students played an important role in shaping the public image of study abroad.

Some overseas student writing challenged the official view. In 1925, for instance, the *Chinese Students’ Monthly* published “Going Through College,” a short story by Chi Chang. The narrator, a former overseas student, begins by recalling his journey to the US. Though filled with anticipation and excitement, he lacked a clear

\(^{40}\) Wang notes that the specified objectives of study abroad shifted over time, from producing technicians in the late nineteenth century to producing educators and political leaders during the early twentieth century. However, both objectives emphasize the public dimension of study abroad over the private.
sense of purpose. He simply went because “everyone worthwhile was going abroad.”41 Unsure what he wanted to study, the narrator eventually decided on mining. He was drawn to the subject, he claims, not by a sense of duty to China, but by the prospect of risk, adventure, and financial security. Throughout his school career, the narrator struggled to support himself financially. This, coupled with a penchant for drinking and gambling, proved an obstacle to academic success. Although he finds a job at an American engineering firm after graduation, racial discrimination and lack of motivation prevents him from advancing past a certain point on the company ladder. Reflecting back on his life, the narrator questions whether going abroad was the right decision.

This was a far cry from the image of overseas students as competent, patriotic, altruistic national strengtheners promulgated by official discourse. Chang depicts overseas students as individuals with private goals and aspirations. His narrator does not go abroad for the sake of strengthening China, but because “everybody worthwhile was going.” Here, Chang acknowledges that study abroad is an avenue toward wealth, power and influence. As Nathan Mao notes in his introduction to Qian Zhongshu’s *Fortress Beseiged*, a satire of the study abroad movement, study abroad “had its roots in the old Chinese concept of ‘reflecting glory on one’s ancestors.’” Prior to the twentieth century, this meant passing Confucian examinations. However, Mao continues, “after the abolition of the examination system in 1905, the substitute was to study abroad.”42 Like passing an official examination, study abroad was an economic windfall. Wang, for instance, found that by 1932 almost seventy percent of the people

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41 Chang, “Going Through College,” 36-46.
42 Mao, introduction to *Fortress Besieged*, xxi.
listed in *The China Yearbook*’s “Who’s Who” of prominent men in China were former overseas students. In addition to recognizing the economic benefits of study abroad, Chang’s story also denaturalizes the supposed link between study abroad and national rejuvenation. Because Chang’s narrator neglects his studies, he ends up in a dead-end job with no relation to China at all. Study abroad, Chang insists, does not necessarily provide overseas students with the ability to strengthen China.

In general, however, overseas student authors affirmed the official view of study abroad. In *My Life in China and America,* for example, Yung Wing all but admits to pursuing study abroad for self-interested reasons. When he was seven years old, his parents placed him in a foreign school, thinking it would be worthwhile to “put one of their sons to learning English that he might become one of the advanced interpreters and have a more advantageous position from which to make his way into the business and diplomatic world.” Later, while studying at a missionary school in Hong Kong, he is one of only three pupils to volunteer to continue his education in the US. Though Wing does not explain his decision, the prospect of career advancement doubtlessly played a role. In America, he spends three years at a preparatory academy in Massachusetts and then enrolls in Yale. As he prepares to graduate, he wonders what he will do with his Western education. Eventually, he resolves to introduce Western education to China: “I was determined that the rising generation of China should enjoy the same educational advantages that I had enjoyed; that through Western education China might be regenerated, become enlightened and powerful. To

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43 Wang, *Intellectuals and the West,* 177.
accomplish that object became the guiding star of my ambition." Here, Wing assumes the role of national strenghtener. Though he was initially drawn to America by the prospect of economic and social advancement, he ultimately chooses to devote his life to the public good. Upon returning to China, Wing boasts to his mother of having earned a degree from Yale. When she asks him how much money the degree is worth, he responds that it is not worth anything immediately, “but it enabled one to make money quicker and easier than one can who has not been educated...I told her my college education was worth more to me than money, and that I was confident of making plenty of money.” As expected, Wing becomes a high-ranking official with a considerable salary. However, he portrays material comfort as a secondary benefit of study abroad. The crowning achievement of his life, he insists, was the CEM, a scheme to provide China with future political and economic leaders. As depicted in My Life in China and America, study abroad instills both a desire and ability to strengthen China.

In “Our Trip To America,” a 1925 essay published in the Chinese Students’ Monthly, author Ken Shen Weigh uses a similarly direct technique to construct study abroad as a national project. The essay follows a group of overseas students as they make their way by boat from China to America. Weigh begins by asserting that every one of them shares a “desire to learn something from the Golden West and then to take it home with them for the salvation of their motherland from the sad plight in which she is today.” He briefly acknowledges the private dimension of study abroad,

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45 Ibid., 41.
46 Ibid., 50
describing the students’ sadness at having to part with their loved ones. However, he quickly minimizes the importance of personal concerns, arguing that after a short time, “sentimental whims gave place to the call of duty.” The journey itself is ordinary and mundane, as the students spend their time making friends, discussing their plans for the future, and adjusting to life amongst foreigners. At the end of the article, however, Weigh re-affirms the broad, public significance of study abroad: “let us betake ourselves to the great work that lies ahead of us and the heavy responsibilities that are waiting for us in China...[overseas students] have but one aim and purpose in life and that is to serve faithfully, honestly and sincerely their country and their fellow men.” Such pronouncements reinforced the perception that overseas students were commissioners dedicated to strengthening China, rather than private individuals operating out of calculated self-interest.

Overseas student authors like Wing and Weigh did not have to cast themselves as national strengtheners. Doing so was a strategy of self-preservation, an adaptation to the prevailing discourse on Chinese identity coupled with America’s highly restrictive immigration policy.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, overseas students were haunted by the specter of deculturation. This is because study abroad inevitably leads to change, a perception that overseas student writing tended to reinforce. For example, the protagonist of “East is East and West is West,” a 1914 short story published in the *Chinese Students’ Monthly*, undergoes an inner transformation while studying in America. Before leaving China, he was a dedicated scholar who pledged his loyalty to
an uneducated fiancée. While living abroad, his outlook on life began to change. He came to believe that “personal attraction” was more important than “intellectual arts,” and that the goal of life was to make money. At the same time, he also began to reevaluate his ideas on the family, deciding that he wanted to marry a girl with lofty ideals, rather than an intellectual inferior. At the end of the story, he abandons his fiancée and marries an American-educated Chinese girl. For Wing, the changes engendered by study abroad were even more dramatic. After living in America for seven years, he practically forgets his native language. When he eventually returns to China, he has to spend the first six months re-learning how to speak and write Chinese. To contemporary observers, such changes signified a loss of Chinese identity.

Given the assumed connection between cultural identity and political loyalty, the perception of deculturation posed a serious threat to returned students. A frequently cited incident in My Life in China and America helps illustrates this point. When Wing visits his mother for the first time since returning from America, he has grown a mustache. At her request, he promptly shaves it off, causing her to “smile with intense satisfaction, evidently thinking that with all my foreign education, I had not lost my early training of being obedient to my mother.” To Wing’s mother, a change in external appearance signified a loss of underlying Chinese values. By shaving off his mustache, Wing affirmed his commitment to those values, constructing himself as an obedient son. Analogously, in the eyes of late-Qing officials, overseas students were politically suspect. Like Wing and the protagonist of “East is East,”

50 Woon Yung Chun, “East is East and West is West,” 491-93.
51 According to Wing, it was against the custom of the time for unmarried Chinese men to grow out a mustache.
52 Wing, My Life, 51.
they acquired new ideas and adopted new habits while living abroad, suggesting that they had rejected Chinese cultural tradition. Since the regime’s legitimacy derived from its ability to uphold that tradition, overseas students seemed to lack any investment in the status quo, leaving them liable to agitate for reform. This compelled the state to keep close watch over returned students. For example, upon returning to China, the CEM students were held in jail for four days. Although the authorities determined that they did not pose an immediate political threat, they were given only low-level bureaucratic assignments, in hopes of minimizing their influence. Even after the Qing Dynasty had fallen and Confucianism had been thoroughly discredited, the ruling regime, whether nationalist, communist or otherwise, continued to persecute overseas students for having the “wrong” political views.

Due to restrictive American immigration policies, overseas students were limited in their ability to avoid such treatment. One way to mitigate the threat of persecution altogether was by remaining in America. However, between 1880 and 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Acts made this extremely difficult, ensuring that the vast majority of overseas students would eventually have to return to China. Forced to live in a place where they were regarded as dangerous Others, overseas students needed to develop strategies of self-preservation. For authors like Wing and Weigh, positing a desire and ability to strengthen China was one such strategy. Doing so assured the authorities that, regardless of their political and cultural affinities, overseas students remained loyal subjects.

53 A small, highly select number of overseas students did manage to stay on in America after graduation. However, they were clearly the exception, rather than the rule. See Wang, *Intellectuals and the West*, 189.
In addition to avoiding persecution, overseas student authors also chose to construct themselves as national strengtheners out of a genuine sense of responsibility for China’s well-being. Few would disagree that, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, China was in desperate need of strengthening. After the death of Yuan Shikai in 1916, the country descended into what Jonathan Spence modestly termed “a period of political insecurity.” In the absence of a strong central authority, Spence writes, political power “flowed out either to the elites in the provinces – both rural and urban – or to the hundreds of military leaders who began to emerge as dominant power brokers in China’s localities.”54 Unable to collect taxes, the central government could barely afford to pay official salaries, much less defend China against Japanese invasion. Although the nationalist party (KMT) restored a measure of centralized rule in 1927, Japanese aggression and internecine struggle between the nationalists and communists continued to wreak havoc on China up through the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. The stunning collapse of the old order convinced many Chinese intellectuals that the only way to strengthen China was by imitating stronger countries, a view that naturally ascribed an important role to overseas students. As Wang put it, “by virtue of their contacts with the West, these students were assumed to be fully equipped – morally and technically – for the task of redeeming the fallen nation.”55 Proximity to the West, coupled with the traditional association between education and officialdom, encouraged overseas students to see themselves as de facto architects of China’s national salvation. For many overseas

54 Spence, The Search for Modern China, 267.
55 Wang, Intellectuals and the West, 93.
student authors, constructing study abroad as a national project was an expression of sincere belief in their ability to strengthen China.

Foremost among this type of overseas student author was Hu Shi, one of the leading intellectual lights of the New Culture Movement. In 1911, Hu traveled to America on a Boxer indemnity scholarship, where he studied philosophy and English literature at Cornell. During and after his career as an overseas student, he drew on his observations of America to advocate intellectual and social reform in China. In doing so, he styled himself after Liang Qichao and other late-Qing traveling intellectuals. In 1903, Liang, a classically-educated scholar and former disciple of Kang Youwei, spent seven months touring Canada and the United States. Later, he published Notes From a Journey to the New Continent, an account of his travels. Though ostensibly a study of America, the book is very much concerned with China. Exiled to Japan for his involvement in the failed 100 days reform movement of 1898, Liang began writing extensively on the question of why China had failed to develop “a sense of national identity and purpose that would enable it to compete successfully in the struggle for survival.”56 When he traveled to the United States, he bought with him an interest in the question of national strength.

In Notes From a Journey, Liang asserts that observation of America can suggest ways to strengthen China. Before his trip to the US, Liang was an advocate of republican government, arguing that the Chinese people possess an inherent capacity for citizenship and civic responsibility. Unfortunately, he argued, years of autocracy

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56 Grieder, Intellectuals and the State, 163.
had deformed this sensibility, leaving China severely weakened. After visiting San Francisco’s Chinatown, however, Liang re-formulated his assessment of the Chinese character. In *Notes From a Journey*, he writes: “When I look on all societies of the world, none is so disorderly as the Chinese community in San Francisco...The character of the Chinese in China is not superior to those of San Francisco, but at home they are governed by fathers and elder brothers.” This leads him to conclude that if China were to institute republican government, it would fall into a similar state of disrepair. Thus, for the sake of national survival, “the Chinese people must accept authoritarian rule.” Here, Liang insinuates that foreign travel imparts valuable insight into both the condition of China and the problem of national strength. With this perspective in hand, he implies, foreign travelers are ideally positioned to lead China’s quest for national rejuvenation.

In taking this position, Liang himself was following in the steps of an even older tradition. As Jerome Ch’en notes, nineteenth century Chinese envoys to the West were required to keep a diary in which they analyzed Western institutions and described Western social customs. The chief purpose of these diaries was to ascertain the sources of Western power, so that they could eventually be transferred to China. In the first half of the twentieth century, Hu Shi and other overseas student authors lay claim to this tradition. Not only were they students of American learning, but also students of American society. In their capacity as social and cultural observers, they

57 Ibid.
58 Liang, “The Power and Threat of America,” 92.
60 Jerome Ch’en, *China and the West*, 66.
insisted, they came to understand the origins of American economic and political power. This knowledge, they asserted, could be used to strengthen China.

In “American Women,” a well-known speech delivered at Beijing Women’s Normal College in 1918, Hu Shi adopts the role of cultural observer and national strengthener. He begins by praising American women for rejecting the division in social spheres that places men in public and women in private.61 Rather than aspiring to be “virtuous wives and worthy mothers,”62 he argues, they seek to develop their individual talents. As proof, Hu cites the example of an acquaintance at Cornell, a female forestry major. Like her male classmates, she spends long hours working in the woods and frequently has to camp out overnight. This spirit of independence and self-reliance, Hu continues, enables American women to produce value for society. He locates this value in a number of different areas, including education and politics. First, he notes that seventy-five percent of all teachers in the US are women. As educators, they wield vast influence over the nation’s youth, and by extension the direction of social development.63 In addition, he argues, women are important participants in every major political movement, including Temperance, Women’s Suffrage, and Children’s Rights.64 For Hu, women like Jane Addams, founder of Hull House in Chicago and a driving force behind the Progressive Movement, prove that women are capable of changing society for the better.

According to Hu, the spirit of independence and self-reliance also affects American marriage practices. To illustrate this point, he describes a married couple

62 Translation taken from Arkush and Lee, Land Without Ghosts, 118.
64 Ibid., 654
who live separately from each other. While the husband works at a college in upstate New York, the wife supports herself as a typist in New York City, attending music classes at night. This, Hu argues, demonstrates that American women are unwilling to sacrifice their personal goals for the sake of their husbands’ careers. Other women, he claims, take this impulse even further, opting out of the marriage system altogether.

As proof, he presents a series of statistics on American marital status. In addition to the high divorce rate, he draws attention to the large number of unmarried women. While acknowledging the role of economic and structural factors, he concludes: “the most important reason is the aforementioned ‘spirit of self-reliance’. That is, many American women commit themselves to a lifelong career. If marrying and raising a family would mean giving up that career, they simply choose not to marry.

Clearly, Hu’s America was an idealized version of reality. While the “new women” he admired so much certainly did exist in the 1920’s, they were the exception, rather than the rule. Well into the mid-twentieth century, American women were still defined, legally and discursively, as wives and mothers. To this day, career-oriented

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65 Ibid., 575
66 Ibid., 658
67 In The World Split Open (New York: Viking, 2000), Ruth Rosen recounts the experience of Ruth Friedman, a college graduate who later became a full-time housewife and mother during the 1950’s. In reference to her husband’s decision to begin a Ph.D. program, Friedman recalled: “there was no discussion about which one of us would go on for further education. It was just taken for granted that it would be Ben...He was out there and I was in here.” This casts serious doubt on Hu’s assertion that by 1917 American women had categorically rejected the sexual division of labor. In addition, even contemporary American women continue to struggle to balance the competing demands of family and work. In an October 2003 cover story for the New York Times “Magazine,” for instance, Lisa Belkin interviewed a number of successful, highly educated working mothers. Though conflicted, many of these women ultimately chose to abandon their careers, in order to play a more active role in raising
American women still face censure for neglecting their supposed family responsibilities.

However, these discrepancies are less problematic when viewed in light of Hu’s political agenda. He spends most of the speech describing the condition of American women, and at the end abruptly shifts to a critique of China. The spirit of independence and the desire to be more than a “virtuous wife and worthy mother,” Hu claims, “is precisely what Chinese women are most lacking.”68 Presently, he explains, both Chinese men and women rely too heavily on others for support. Were they to develop a greater sense of personal responsibility, it would benefit China as a whole. This is because the “spirit of self-reliance” is a prerequisite for developing a virtuous society (liangshan shehui). Here, Hu finally betrays his intentions. He is not concerned with America as it is, but China as it should be. He wants to convince his audience that in order to strengthen China, Chinese people must become more independent. By describing Americans, the symbol of global power, as independent, he gives his argument the weight of proof. Thus, for Hu’s purposes, this imagined America is far more important than the real America.

Though it falls short as a faithful description of American society, Hu’s speech was an effective piece of political propaganda. While studying in America, Hu wrote in his diary about many of the same incidents he would later recount in “American Women.” In an entry dated November 9, 1916, for instance, he describes meeting Carmen S. Reuben, a married woman who lives separately from her husband. He

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67 Their children. 68 Hu, 663
praises Reuben’s character, and then concludes the entry by explaining: “last night I went with her to have dinner at the home of Mr. Schumm (the father), so I have written about [her] here.” In contrast, in “American Women,” Hu discusses this encounter not simply because it happened, but because it helps prove a point. At a discursive level, the speech transforms study abroad into a useful commodity. Regardless of what overseas students learn in school, Hu implies, they return home equipped with cultural knowledge that can be used to strengthen China.

By asserting that study abroad is more than a purely academic pursuit, Hu positioned overseas students as architects of China’s national salvation. As Wang notes, in China, political leadership was traditionally justified on the basis of “morals and scholarship,” rather than technical skill. As a result, traditional Chinese education placed little emphasis on mechanical and scientific knowledge. Although the bureaucratic examination system was abolished in 1905, a predilection for abstract, theoretical knowledge continued to characterize Chinese intellectual circles for decades. This caused many intellectuals to look down on study abroad, which, in their opinion, provided only a secondary form of knowledge. “America,” a 1927 article by writer and professor of logic Jin Yuelin, expresses this view. Because Americans see education as an investment, Jin argues, American schools are geared toward teaching concrete, practical skills. This ensures that students receive highly specialized, technical training in one field, but leaves them completely unversed in others. Because they lack broad-based, theoretical knowledge, Jin concludes, the majority of American

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70 Wang, Intellectuals and the West, 20.
71 Ibid., 9.
72 Jin Yuelin, “America,” 27.
students can not be considered true scholars. As products of the American education system, overseas students were subject to the same criticism. In the eyes of officials, they were technicians, rather than leaders. In “American Women,” Hu Shi lay claim to a more expansive role for overseas students. He did not challenge prevailing assumptions about the nature of American education, but located the value of study abroad outside the realm of academics. In Hu’s writings, overseas students do not simply acquire technical skills, but theoretical knowledge about the underlying sources of American power. As scholars of American society, they are qualified to orchestrate, rather than simply participate in, China’s quest for national salvation.

In advocating cultural reform as a means of strengthening China, Hu and other New Culture intellectuals posited a new vision of Chinese identity. As Townsend points out, prior to the early twentieth century, the Chinese political community was coterminous with Confucian culture. By the 1920’s, Chinese intellectuals had largely abandoned Confucianism. However, they continued positing a desire to strengthen China. This implied that China was a political community that existed independently of Confucian culture, a nation. In his classic 1881 speech “What is a Nation?,” French historian Ernst Renan argued that a nation is not an essential unit of political organization rooted ethnic ties, but a:

large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation’s existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite.\textsuperscript{73}

Hu’s notion of China hews closely to Renan’s model of civic nationalism. In

\textsuperscript{73} Renan, “What is a Nation?” 19.
“American Women” and other writings, China is not just a cultural heritage, but an imagined community of which Hu feels himself a part. In order to preserve the integrity of this community, he is willing to sacrifice its cultural heritage. This transition from a culturalist to a nationalist model of Chinese identity⁷⁴ has had broad-ranging implications for the remainder of twentieth century Chinese history. As Lucian Pye has argued, it spared China the “crisis of identity” experienced by most countries in the transition to modernity. Though their understanding of what constitutes “Chinese” has shifted over time, Chinese people have always remained confident in their Chineseness.⁷⁵

Official Discourse on Study Abroad in post-Mao China, 1979 – 1996

After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, the flow of Chinese students to America virtually stopped. Initially, the Communist Party government pursued a policy of engagement with the outside world, arguing that China could not achieve its twin goals of socializing agriculture and modernizing industry without international assistance. However, Mao Zedong argued in a 1949 essay, the Chinese people would have to “lean on one side” or the other in their allegiances, toward

⁷⁴ As Townsend suggests, this shift was not as profound as some scholars have argued. First, prior to the twentieth century, Confucianism served as a unifying force only at the elite level of society. Second, Townsend writes, culturalism itself was a kind of pre-modern nationalism, implying that a particular ethnic group, the Han, had its own political order.

socialism over imperialism. The US, as a capitalist nation, naturally fell into the imperialist camp. In the aftermath of the Korean War, Sino-American relations further soured. To the Chinese government, American involvement in Korea demonstrated “clear evidence of US ambitions in East Asia, and of the implacable hatred of the United States for China and the Chinese people.” Thus, in the early years of the PRC, government leaders continued to support study abroad, but they did not send any students to the US.

By the 1960’s, China had completely turned its back on the international community, severing ties with even socialist allies like the Soviet Union. This move was accompanied by a shift in the discourse on national development. Instead of importing foreign technology and foreign technical experts, Mao argued, the key to strengthening China was rural self-reliance and revolutionary zeal. This attitude was exemplified by the slogan “in agriculture learn from Dazhai, in industry learn from Daqing.” Daqing and Dazhai were, respectively, an agricultural commune in Shaanxi and an oil field in Heilongjiang. According to official reports, workers at Dazhai and Daqing had achieved dramatic increases in production through dint of sheer hard work and commitment to socialism. Because they believed that China did not need any outside help, the government stopped supporting study abroad.

After Mao’s death, official policy toward study abroad changed course once again. The upheavals of the Cultural Revolution had severely damaged China’s

77 Spence, *Search*, 505.
78 Ibid., 562.
79 Ibid., 563.
economic and military standing. To address this problem, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, initiated the ‘Open Up and Reform’ policy. Deng’s immediate goal was realization of the ‘Four Modernizations,’ in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. To do so, Deng argued, it was not only necessary to encourage foreign investment and import foreign technology, but also to send Chinese students overseas. In 1978, a delegation headed by Frank Press, US presidential advisor on science and technology, traveled to China to discuss the exchange of scientific and technological information. When the Americans also proposed an exchange of students, their Chinese counterparts enthusiastically accepted. This initiated a new chapter in the history of Chinese study abroad to America. What began as a trickle of ‘visiting scholars’ in the late 70’s and early 80’s quickly grew to a tidal wave of full-time graduate and undergraduate students. By the academic year 1995/96, there were nearly 40,000 Chinese students studying in America.81

During the post-Mao era, official discourse continued to construct study abroad as a national project. In 1979, The People’s Daily, official news organ of the Communist Party, published Wang Ruoshui’s “A Glimpse of America.” Wang, a high-ranking party ideologue, traveled to America as a member of the Chinese News Delegation, the first group of Chinese reporters to visit the US since 1949. In addition to describing American social life, Wang also speculates on the nature of national power. Among other things, he argues, American economic and military hegemony is predicated on a willingness to learn from other countries (xiang waiguo xuexi). As proof, he cites the “widely acknowledged” contribution of dissident German scientists

80 Ibid., 619.
who fled Hitler’s Germany during the 1930’s and 40’s to America’s technological development. More instructive than America, he continues, is the case of Japan. Because the Japanese are good at learning from foreign countries, he claims, they have already surpassed the US in a number of areas, including television and automobile manufacturing. As a result, the US has no choice but to regard them as equals. This leads Wang to ask: “If Japan can do it, why not China?”82 Here, he asserts a direct link between learning from the outside world and strengthening China. Though he does not specifically address the role of overseas students, his argument expresses tacit approval of study abroad. Because learning from other countries fosters technological development, sending Chinese students abroad would necessarily help China realize the “Four Modernizations.”

Official discourse in the post-Mao era continued to promulgate a narrowly circumscribed vision of study abroad. In “A Glimpse of America,” Wang argues that although America has many things worth imitating, there are also many things in China worth retaining. Reformulating the late nineteenth century ti/yong dichotomy, he writes: “we should study [America’s] technology, while rejecting their philosophy.”83 Official policy on study abroad reflected this view, placing a high priority on technical training. In 1978, for example, the government requested a list of over 400 placements for Chinese students in American schools. Of those, only twenty-four were in subjects other than mathematics, engineering, and the physical sciences.84

In the process of studying American technology, Wang insists, Chinese people need

82 Wang, “A Glimpse of America.”
83 Ibid.
84 Spence, Search, 620.
not adopt the “rotten” points of American culture. That is, they should import computers, but not striptease; they should embrace Americans’ love of efficiency, but reject their love of “eating, drinking, and pleasure.” As in the late-Qing and Republican periods, overseas students were expected to acquire knowledge useful for strengthening China without sacrificing their Chinese essence.

Like their late-Qing predecessors, post-Mao officials instructed overseas students to retain a Chinese essence out of calculated self-interest. Advocating a policy of selective modernization, Wang writes: “We have a superior socialist system and should be able to avoid capitalist corruption.” For Wang, it is not belief in Confucian morality, but commitment to socialism that must be preserved. Although the government’s definition of what constituted “Chinese” values had shifted, the desire to uphold those values remained the same. Like the Qing Dynasty, the Communist Party’s ability to command the loyalty of its subjects was predicated on their belief in a particular brand of political ideology. In taking steps to prevent the erosion of that ideology, the Party solidified its base of power.

Leaving China: Overseas Student Writing in the 1980’s

Overseas student authors are free to complicate and denaturalize the official view of study abroad. As I demonstrated in the previous section, during the early twentieth century, practical considerations discouraged most overseas students from actually doing so. Because they would ultimately have to live in China, overseas student authors were compelled to construct themselves as acceptable Chinese

85 Translation taken from Arkush and Lee, Land Without Ghosts, 256.
86 Wang, “A Glimpse of America.”
subjects. When study abroad resumed in the late 1970’s, changes in US immigration policy altered the calculus of this decision. As in the earlier period, overseas students who transgressed the boundaries of Chinese identity risked political and economic ostracism in China. However, with the introduction of expatriation as an escape hatch, perceived loss of Chinese identity was no longer an insurmountable problem. If overseas students saw no value in remaining attached to the Chinese polity, they could simply stay in America. There, they were free to reject the role of national strengthener, conceptualize study abroad as a private experience, and posit a loss of Chinese identity without fear of censure.

This is exactly what happened during the 1980’s, when disillusionment with socialism and a perceived lack of career opportunities in China discouraged many overseas students from returning home after graduation. In 1981, New York Times correspondent Fox Butterfield spent a year reporting from Beijing. The following year, he published China: Alive in the Bitter Sea, a memoir of his experiences. Shortly after arriving in China, Butterfield observes that the Cultural Revolution had left the Chinese people “chastened, cynical, and numb.”87 The predominant mood among the younger generation, he argues, was “cynicism, apathy and indifference.”88 Life was particularly difficult for college students, who had to contend with inadequate facilities89 and insufficient living expenses.90 After finishing school, college graduates

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87 Butterfield, Alive, 38.
88 Ibid., 182.
89 Butterfield notes that the cafeteria at Beijing University, one of the most prestigious universities in China, did not have enough funds to purchase tables, chairs, bowls, or chopsticks. As a result, students were forced to purchase their own utensils and take food back to their dormitories to eat.
had no choice but to sit at home and wait for a menial job assignment. As one twenty
two year old woman put it, “for us young people, there is no road out...there is no
future.”

The dream of studying abroad, Butterfield asserts, “was the last great
motivation for young people, and kept many of them from falling into the apathy that
had overtaken the country’s bureaucracy, factory workers, and less-talented
youngsters.”

If students did manage to get out of China, they had little reason to
return. During the 1980’s, peasants in many parts of rural China still had no access to
running water and other basic amenities. Although far more developed than the
countryside, China’s cities suffered from a shortage of jobs and housing. Food was
scarce, consumer goods were hard to obtain, and creature comforts like cars and home
appliances were available to only a select few. Faced with the option of staying or
leaving, the majority of overseas students chose to stay.

This shift in the practice of study abroad led to a corresponding shift in popular
discourse. Lacking incentives to affirm their commitment to China, overseas student
authors writing during the 1980’s expressed a marked sense of ambivalence toward
their prescribed role as national strengtheners. In her 1988 novella *The Ice River in the
Jungle*, Zha Jianying characterizes study abroad as a search for personal fulfillment.

After graduating from Beijing University in 1982, Zha studied English at the
University of South Carolina and comparative literature at Columbia. Like Zha, the
unnamed narrator of *The Ice River in the Jungle* is an overseas student studying

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90 In 1982, students were expected to survive on a government stipend of nineteen
yuan per month, barely enough to survive. Constant hunger, Butterfield asserts,
prevented students from focusing on their studies.

91 Ibid., 191.

92 Ibid., 195.
English literature in America. The novella’s title is a reference to Henry James’s *The Beast in the Jungle*, a short story the narrator reads soon after arriving in America. In James’s story, protagonist John Marcher has a recurring premonition, “a sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen to him.” In *The Ice River in the Jungle*, Zha introduces Marcher’s predicament as such: “Since his youth, Marcher had a strange and intense pre-sentiment that he would experience an extraordinary event in his life. This event would determine the meaning of his life...Marcher decided to sacrifice everything in order to answer its call.” Throughout the novella, Zha draws explicit parallels between Marcher and her narrator. When a classmate asks the narrator why she came to America, she responds vaguely: “I came, so that I could find something.” Though lacking a well-defined sense of purpose, the narrator, like the students described by Butterfield, views study abroad as an “extraordinary event” that can imbue her life with meaning. For her, study abroad is a personal, rather than national, project.

Zha further undermines the presumed link between study abroad and national development by suggesting that overseas students have neither the desire nor ability to strengthen China. Like Marcher, the narrator makes sacrifices for her “extraordinary event.” Before coming to America, she fell in love with a Chinese classmate named D. When the opportunity to go abroad arose, she “took leave of D without a flicker of regret. Convinced that if one does not aim high she will not go far, I came to the US,

93 Henry James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 556.
95 Wen, *Cultural Translation*, 85.
full of dreams of making great discoveries.\textsuperscript{96} D, meanwhile, decided to stay in China, going to work in the underdeveloped Northwest. Several years later, the narrator learns that D has died in a bus accident, prompting her to return to China. Following in D’s footsteps, she embarks on a journey to the Northwest, where she observes firsthand China’s crushing rural poverty. She briefly considers staying on in the Northwest, but wonders if there is any point: “What was I hoping to get from the Northwest? Would I sell garlic? Sell melons? Or teach Mandarin in Xinjiang?”\textsuperscript{97} None of it matters, she decides, because D was already dead. Disheartened, she leaves the Northwest, and eventually returns to America. For Zha’s narrator, even the direct experience of poverty does not incite a sense of patriotic duty. Presented with clear evidence of China’s continuing weakness, she simply turns her back and leaves. For her, the “extraordinary event” to which study abroad will ultimately lead is not participation in China’s national rejuvenation.

The reason why overseas students have trouble fulfilling the role of national strenghtener, Zha suggests, is that study abroad engenders a crisis of identity. When the narrator first arrives in America, she reflects, “deep down, I wanted to be reborn, to become a carefree Westerner. I imagined growing taller, my eyes turning green, my hair growing as straight as wheat stalks. Alas, I was still thinking these things in Chinese. Fake foreign devil!”\textsuperscript{98} This persistent identification with China prevents the narrator from ever feeling truly at home in America. When she returns to China, however, she also feels out of place. Her first day back, “everything in my old house

\textsuperscript{96} Translation take from Wen, \textit{Cultural Translation}, 85.
\textsuperscript{97} Zha, \textit{Ice River}, 98.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 50.
seemed a size smaller, including my parents.” While traveling through the Northwest, local people constantly stare at her. Frustrated, “I closed my eyes and imagined what I looked like at that moment. I couldn’t figure out what, but there was something vaguely off. I was dressed like an authentic Chinese person, but somehow I just didn’t look like one.” As with Yung Wing, the narrator’s change in appearance signifies a loss of Chinese identity. Her first night in the Northwest, she checks into a guesthouse run by a former Young Intellectual. Because the guesthouse does not have a bathroom, the owner’s daughter, Lanzi, takes her to a public outhouse across town. On the way back, Lanzi asks: “Do you people over there (nim en nar) have outhouses in their own courtyards?” The question catches the narrator off guard. “Over there” refers to a place associated with wealth and power. For Lanzi, that place is China’s Eastern seaboard. To the narrator, however, it is America. Thus, the “you people” to which the narrator belongs is both urban Chinese and American. This pattern of dual identification, Zha suggests, sets overseas students apart from regular Chinese people. The narrator likens her predicament to a state of purgatory: “I could not die like D, but I could not live like the people around me.” It is this in-between identity, neither fully Chinese nor fully American, that prevents her from committing herself to China.

Re-entering China: Overseas Student Writing in the Early 90’s

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99 Ibid., 76.
100 Ibid., 94.
101 An urban student who was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.
102 Ibid., 96.
103 Ibid., 98.
During the early 90's, the speed of economic reform in China began to accelerate. Throughout the 80's, China still had a thoroughly mixed economy. Although the government created a number of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) open to foreign direct investment, they were limited to Eastern and Southern China. The state also de-collectivized agriculture and encouraged the development of small, private enterprise, but continued to set prices and maintain direct control over key industries. In the Spring of 1992, Deng Xiaoping moved to “deepen” the economic reforms, opening up ten additional cities in Northwest, Southwest, Northeast and inland China to foreign trade. Over the next several years, increases in exports and foreign investment led to average annual GDP growth of more than thirteen percent, making China the third-largest economy in the world. The prospect of benefiting from this explosive economic growth gave overseas students reason to re-affirm their commitment to China.

One way they did so was by re-embracing the role of national strengthener. Zhou Li, author of the extremely influential “autobiographical novel” *A Chinese Woman in Manhattan*, opted for this strategy. In 1985, Zhou traveled to America as a self-funded overseas student. Her book, published in 1992, alleges that after less than four years, she had already become a millionaire businesswoman with a luxurious apartment overlooking Central Park. *A Chinese Woman in Manhattan* was extremely popular among Chinese students, selling more than 500,000 copies within five months

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106 Spence, *Search*, 710.
107 Meisner, *Deng Xiaoping*, 472.
of its initial release.108 This naturally attracted the attention of readers in New York’s overseas Chinese community, sparking a nationwide controversy. While Zhou claimed that ninety five percent of her book was based on real people and events, acquaintances in New York argued that it was mostly fabricated. Rather than midtown Manhattan, they pointed out, Zhou lived with her parents in one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York. Her business, meanwhile, did not even make enough profit to cover the cost of renting an office space. In response to these revelations, critics accused Zhou of falsely peddling the American dream.

However, as Chen Xiaomei has argued, the exaggerations and omissions in Zhou’s novel largely account for its appeal. During the early 80’s, Butterfield observed, most senior positions in China were reserved for elderly veterans in their sixties and seventies, leaving young people frustrated in their career ambitions. As one newspaper editor told Butterfield: “[young people] are at the height of their mental and physical powers, but they have to accept being in a low or mediocre position.”109 Although the situation had improved somewhat by the early 90’s, China remained a strictly hierarchical society. In contrast, in Zhou’s vision of America, success is available to anyone with talent and ambition, regardless of social status. Zhou, for instance, comes to the United States a poor, marginalized overseas student with little work experience and few social connections. Nevertheless, through hard work and dedication, she quickly becomes a successful businesswoman. Whether or not Zhou’s story was actually true, the fact that it struck a chord with Chinese readers is significant. In Occidentalism, Chen explains: “the fictional depiction of an imagined

108 Chen Xiaomei, Occidentalism, 158.
109 Butterfield, Alive, 216.
West...is particularly appealing to many Chinese readers as an alternative to the social reality of contemporary China, where success is usually attributed to family background and privilege.\(^\text{110}\) As this suggests, while outwardly celebrating the American dream, \textit{A Chinese Woman in Manhattan} also advances a subtle critique of China. Following in the footsteps of Hu Shi, Zhou does not write about America as it is, but China as she thinks it should be. In Zhou’s book, America, the most powerful country in the world, embraces the spirit of meritocracy. In order to grow strong, she implies, China must do the same. Although her book celebrates the pursuit of individual excellence, Zhou, by participating in the discourse on national rejuvenation, adopts the role of national strengthener.

In 1996’s \textit{Chinese Students Encounter America} Qian Ning uses a related strategy to affirm overseas students’ commitment to China. Qian, a former cultural reporter for the \textit{People’s Daily}, spent five years studying and teaching at the University of Michigan in the early 90’s. His book is a journalistic account of the post-1979 study abroad movement that focuses primarily on the texture of overseas student life. Like Butterfield, Qian argues that overseas students chose to go abroad during the 80’s so that they could inject meaning into an otherwise “ordinary, languid, and colorless”\(^\text{111}\) existence. At the time, he explains, everything in China was strictly rationed, which enabled the government to limit freedom of movement. As one factory worker told Butterfield: “If you don’t have the proper residence certificate, you can’t get your ration cards, and, without them, you can’t live.”\(^\text{112}\) On a local level, the

\(^{110}\) Chen, \textit{Occidentalism}, 165.  
\(^{111}\) Qian, \textit{Chinese Students Encounter America}, 31.  
\(^{112}\) Butterfield, \textit{Alive}, 101.
danwei, or work unit, exercised a high degree of social control. In addition to providing employment, health care, and education, the danwei also decided who a person could marry and where they could live.\footnote{Qian, Chinese Students, 41.} This system, Qian continues, ensured that most Chinese people led a largely “choiceless life.” Once assigned to a work unit, “your life would be so straight that you could predict it until the very end.”\footnote{Ibid., 37.} Under these circumstances, study abroad was appealing because it provided young people with a measure of agency. To illustrate, Qian recounts the experience of a foreign languages major from Jiangsu. After finishing graduate school, she was hired by her university to teach bi-weekly English drill classes. Beyond that, she was not given any useful work. Fearing that her language skills would deteriorate if she did not use them, she decided to study abroad. In addition to pragmatic concerns, Qian writes, “she was young; the glittering world outside was more attractive than her shared-room dormitory.” Years later, while living in the US and working for an international organization, the woman felt lonely and bored. Nevertheless, she refused to consider returning to China: “It’s better here – at least I’m free.”\footnote{Ibid., 47.} Echoing Zha, Qian asserted that many overseas students choose to study abroad simply because, “no matter how you look at it, going abroad is at least something.”\footnote{Ibid., 31.}

Unlike Zha, however, Qian does not reject the public dimension of study abroad. While acknowledging that China has “generally inferior living conditions and

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item Qian, Chinese Students, 41.
\item Ibid., 37.
\item Ibid., 47.
\item Ibid., 47.
\item Ibid., 31.
\end{itemize}}
a political system that allow[s] less individual freedom,"\textsuperscript{117} he scolds overseas students for choosing to remain in America after graduation:

If the generation of students who had dreams, embraced great aspirations, and endured enormous hardships in China all became tamed by comfortable housing and the abundance of food and were content with a life of mediocrity, it would be a great tragedy...for the whole study abroad program.\textsuperscript{118}

Here, Qian implies that the goal of study abroad is more than securing a comfortable, middle class lifestyle. In the closing lines of \textit{Chinese Students Encounter America}, he makes this point more explicit, arguing: "For China, sending students abroad was not a simple gesture of cultural exchange but, rather, the shouldering of a burden in its determination to further the country’s development."\textsuperscript{119} That is, the overarching goal of study abroad is to strengthen China. Although overseas students may choose to go abroad for private reasons, they still have public responsibilities. Faced with the decision to stay or leave, they should put public responsibility before private interest and return home.

In order to construct overseas students as patriotic national strengtheners, Qian manipulates the discourse on Chinese identity. While living abroad, he writes, overseas students change their habits, their language, and sometimes even their nationality. However, "just as they could not alter the color of their skin, they could not change their consciousness of being Chinese."\textsuperscript{120} In \textit{The Ice River in the Jungle}, Zha makes a similar claim about overseas students’ inability to lose their Chinese identity. However, the two authors draw opposite conclusions about the implications

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 198.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 165.
of this problem. Zha suggests that “consciousness of being Chinese” touches off an identity crisis that ultimately prevents overseas students from strengthening China. Qian, meanwhile, argues that because overseas students’ social and economic status in America is “closely correlated to China’s international image,” study abroad necessarily instills patriotic devotion. In this formulation, Chinese identity is linked to the PRC, a specific territorial and political entity. The PRC itself, meanwhile, is inextricably tied to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Since Chinese identity is a fixed, biological fact, it follows that overseas students are necessarily invested in the PRC, and by extension the Communist Party. In the eyes of Party officials still wary of overseas student involvement in the Democracy Movement of the late 80’s, this cast study abroad as a safe, non-threatening practice. Doing so helped ensure that overseas students could pursue study abroad and still reap the benefits of China’s economic growth.

**Conclusion**

Since the nineteenth century, Chinese officials have had an uneasy relationship with study abroad. On the one hand, they recognize the value of study abroad in strengthening China’s position vis-à-vis the West. On the other hand, they fear study abroad will undermine state legitimacy by exposing Chinese students to alternative forms of social and political organization. In order to enjoy the benefits of Western science and technology without compromising state authority, officials have consistently imposed legal and discursive strictures on the practice of study abroad.

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121 Ibid., 167.
Specifically, official discourse directs overseas students to acquire scientific and technical expertise that can be used to strengthen China, but in the process maintain a Chinese identity. This displaces officials’ concerns over loss of political authority onto the issue of identity. In insisting that overseas students preserve their Chinese identity, the state lay claim to their continued political loyalty.

Although overseas student authors have tended to affirm the official view of study abroad, they do so only out of self-interest. Because the state exercises sweeping control over China’s economic and political resources, overseas students looking to enjoy the social and economic benefits of study abroad while living in or doing business with China must present themselves as acceptable, loyal subjects. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, restrictive American immigration policies ensured that the vast majority of overseas students would eventually have to live in China. There, in order to affirm their political loyalties and avoid persecution, overseas student authors were compelled to construct themselves as national strengtheners.

By the late 1970’s, the American government had lifted the ban on Chinese immigration, presenting overseas students with a choice between staying in America or returning to China. During the 80’s, disillusionment with socialism and a perceived lack of career opportunities in China encouraged most to stay. Living and working in America, they had little reason to affirm their political loyalty to China. Accordingly, they rejected the role of national strengthener, positing an in-between identity that precluded fully committing themselves to China. As China began to emerge as an economic powerhouse in the early 90’s, overseas students once again had reason to
construct themselves as loyal subjects. Though the majority continued to remain in America after graduation, they stood to profit by trading with and investing in China. As always, the state saw overseas students as a potential source of instability. To assuage these fears, overseas student authors re-embraced the role of national strengthener. In the process of doing so, they posited a biological notion of Chinese identity linked to the PRC, assuring Communist Party leaders that overseas students did not pose a threat to state authority. Since the early 90’s, China has only grown stronger, giving contemporary overseas student authors even more incentive to comply with official discourse.
Chapter 2: Contemporary Study Abroad

Introduction

In recent years, books written by and about overseas students have witnessed a surge in popularity. The most well-known entry in this now-burgeoning genre is 2000’s Harvard Girl, Liu Yiting, a massive best-seller that has gone through fourteen printings and sold more than three million copies. In Harvard Girl, Liu’s mother, Liu Weihua, and step-father, Zhang Xinwu, describe how they prepared Liu to become the first Chinese student to receive a full undergraduate scholarship to Harvard. The book’s phenomenal success inspired a string of copycat titles, each promising to instruct Chinese parents how to raise an ivy league-caliber child.122 Other entries in the genre, however, have bucked this trend, focusing on the experience of study abroad. Two examples are 2002’s Harvard Boy, by Tian Ye, and 2007’s Yale’s Spirit, by Feng Jianmei. In this chapter, I will use these three books to examine the contemporary discourse on the meaning and purpose study abroad.

In the introduction to 1997’s Ungrounded Empires, a collection of essays on Chinese transnationalism, editors Aihwah Ong and Donald Nonini characterize study abroad as a strategy of capital accumulation. The acceleration of Deng Xiaoping’s “Open Up and Reform” policy during the early 1990’s, they argue, brought an influx of people and images from outside China. This, anthropologist T.E. Woronov has argued, caused Chinese people’s “horizons of desire for their lives and their children to expand beyond China’s territory out into the world.”123 Evidence of this shift can be

122 Some sample titles include Stanford’s Silver Bullet, How We Got Our Child Into Yale, and Creed of Harvard.
seen in the ever-increasing popularity of study abroad. According to Woronov, Chinese students pursue study abroad as a means of gaining greater access to global wealth and power.

By enabling Chinese citizens to accumulate social and economic capital outside the bounds of state control, Ong and Nonini argue, study abroad poses an implicit threat to the state. *Harvard Boy* attests to this possibility, delineating Tian Ye’s transformation from a passive, obedient student into a pro-active, independent entrepreneur. In *Harvard Boy*, he does not express an overt desire to strengthen China. Instead, he simply uses study abroad to accumulate various forms of capital, eventually dropping out of Harvard to start his own business. In the process, he begins to question the value of both collectivism and economic development. This vision of study abroad naturally arouses suspicion on the part of the state.

Liu Yiting and Feng Jianmei also use study abroad to accumulate social and economic capital, securing corporate jobs in New York and Hong Kong after graduation. Thus, like Tian, they also pose a potential threat to state authority. To mitigate the perception of threat, Feng and Liu employ a variety of discursive strategies designed to construct overseas students as loyal national subjects. One way they achieve this aim is by analyzing the sources of American power and suggesting ways to strengthen China. Doing so situates contemporary overseas students within the tradition of modernizing intellectuals like Hu Shi, affirming their continued commitment to China’s well-being.

*Harvard Girl* and *Yale’s Spirit* also construct overseas students as loyal national subjects in a novel way. In *Harvard Girl*, Liu Weihua and Zhang Xinwu
argue that Liu Yiting was admitted to Harvard because of her well-rounded suzhi (“quality”). The discourse on suzhi holds that national strength is a function of population quality. By casting Liu’s acceptance to Harvard as an affirmation of suzhi, Liu and Zhang posit an ontological link between study abroad and national development. Critics, have questioned this logic, arguing that overseas students must demonstrate suzhi by creating value for society. Feng and Liu resolve this dilemma by constructing study abroad as an instance of suzhi jiaoyu (“education for quality”). That is, in Harvard Girl and Yale’s Spirit, they suggest that study abroad instills both the desire and ability to strengthen China. This suggests that even if overseas students accumulate capital and develop non-traditional subjectivities, their interests remain fundamentally in line with those of the state.

Study Abroad and Capital Accumulation

For contemporary overseas students, study abroad is an inherently transnational practice. Schiller et al. define transnationalism as the condition in which individuals “take actions, make decisions, feel connections and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously.” While studying in America, the ease of electronic communication and the affordability of international air travel keeps Chinese students strongly connected to China. In addition, unlike their predecessors in the 1980’s, many contemporary overseas students

124 Schiller et. al., Towards a Transnational Perspective, 1-2.
go to the US intent on returning to China. This naturally encourages the sensation of “belonging simultaneously to two different places.”

In *Ungrounded Empires*, Ong and Nonini argue that such transnational practices must be understood as strategies of “capital accumulation.” Drawing on the theories of David Harvey and Pierre Bourdieu, they propose that “capital” comes in a variety of different forms, including economic, cultural, symbolic, educational, social and linguistic. Such capitals, they assert, are “different, mutually convertible kinds of culturally refined resources that can be converted into personal power.” In the case of study abroad, they suggest, the educational capital of a degree can easily translate to other forms of capital, such as material wealth, social prestige and eligibility for legal citizenship. Clearly, capital accumulation is an important dimension of study abroad.

In her essay “Chinese Children, American Education,” T.E. Woronov examines the relationship between capital accumulation and study abroad. According to Woronov, contemporary Chinese parents are extremely concerned with the issue of social reproduction, “the question of how to prepare the next generation to meet the challenges of the future.” Prior to the 1990’s, she argues, social reproduction was largely the domain of the Chinese government. Throughout the Maoist era, the state provided urban residents with lifelong employment, housing and health care. During the early 90’s, however, the government began systematically dismantling both the

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125 Ma, “Space Place and Transnationalism,” 12.
127 Ibid., 22.
128 Ibid., 23.
centralized economy and the welfare state. Although these reforms have opened up vast new realms of economic opportunity, they have also engendered a great deal of anxiety. In the absence of a social safety net, Chinese people are no longer guaranteed a minimum level of financial security.\textsuperscript{130} For Chinese parents, this makes the problem of social reproduction particularly urgent.

Compounding the problem, Ong and Nonini suggest, is that in place of the planned economy, there now exists a “regime of flexible accumulation.” Quoting David Harvey, they suggest that flexible accumulation:

\begin{quote}
rests on flexibility with respect to labor processes, labor markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological and organizational innovation.\textsuperscript{131}
\end{quote}

As Doreen Massey has pointed out, though, the “speedups, accelerated turnover times and increased mobility” associated with flexible accumulation “do not affect all persons and groups equally.”\textsuperscript{132} In addition to a class of managerial and service professionals, she argues, globalization has also produced a massive population of part-time, semiskilled laborers. Naturally, Chinese parents want their children to enter the workforce as members of former group, rather than the latter. To achieve this goal, they turn to America. As the wealthiest, most powerful nation in the world, they assume, America must educate the best capitalists. Thus, they believe, studying in

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 31.
\item\textsuperscript{131} Harvey, \textit{The Condition of Postmodernity} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 147, quoted in Ong and Nonini, “Chinese Transnationalism,” 9-10.
\end{footnotes}
America promises to provide their children with the educational capital necessary to succeed in the global economy.

In addition to educational capital, study abroad also provides overseas students with invaluable social and symbolic capital. According to anthropologist Xin Liu, spatial categories have always played a central role in organizing Chinese social imagination. Throughout the imperial period, he writes, rural residents looking to pursue business and educational opportunities had to travel to urban centers.\textsuperscript{133} For them, upward social mobility required physical movement. The Confucian examination system further underscored the link between social mobility and spatial mobility, as successful examinees moved from the countryside to the city.\textsuperscript{134} Overall, Liu writes: “the closer one moved to the top and the center, the greater one’s social power; power and prestige diminished once one moved to the peripheries.”\textsuperscript{135}

Even today, Liu suggests, Chinese people tend to pursue upward mobility through a strategy of \textit{spatial extroversion}, “practices whereby subjects orient themselves toward people and places that are supposed to be higher up on social-spatial hierarchies.”\textsuperscript{136} During the Maoist era, the state attempted to invert the traditional socio-spatial space, praising the countryside as politically advanced. However, Liu notes, since real political power continued to emanate from large cities like Beijing, these efforts largely failed. The economic reforms of the 1980’s and early 90’s led to an influx of capital, people and ideas from outside China. This, coupled with the lifting of restrictions on overseas travel, helped extend the Chinese socio-

\textsuperscript{133} Liu, “Space Mobility and Flexibility,” 92.  
\textsuperscript{134} Woronov, “Chinese Children, American Education,” 35.  
\textsuperscript{135} Liu, “Space, Mobility and Flexibility,” 92.  
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 96.
spatial hierarchy beyond the boundaries of China. Now, the perceived “centers of power” are international cosmopoles like New York, Sydney and Vancouver, rather than Chinese cities like Beijing or Shanghai. By facilitating movement toward the center of power, study abroad brings increased social and symbolic capital, which can then be leveraged into economic gains.

Tian Ye’s *Harvard Boy* offers a vision of study abroad in which capital accumulation plays a central role. Like Liu Yiting, Tian was admitted to Harvard as an eighteen-year-old undergraduate. In the opening chapter of *Harvard Boy*, he reflects briefly on the child-rearing practices that helped pave the way for his acceptance. As a young boy, Tian recalls, his parents made a conscious effort to instill qualities like confidence and independence, encouraging him to voice his own opinions and organize his own time. However, despite the title’s obvious reference to *Harvard Girl*, the book is not a child-rearing manual. Instead, it focuses on Tian’s experience studying in America. During his second year at Harvard, Tian enters and wins the Harvard Student Agencies (HSA) Entrepreneurial Contest. Convinced that his business idea has the potential to succeed in the real world, he decides to withdraw from Harvard and return to China to seek venture capital.

This decision reflects a more generalized view of study abroad as a means to an end. Early on in *Harvard Boy*, Tian criticizes the practice, common among Chinese overseas students, of reflexively acquiring more and more advanced degrees. Unless you actually plan on becoming an academic, he argues, this is simply a waste of time. As an example, he cites the clerk at his local Chinese video rental shop in Boston, a former overseas student with a masters from MIT. More important than a degree
itself, he implies, is the symbolic, social and experiential capital that overseas students acquire while living and studying in America. At Harvard, for instance, participation in the entrepreneurial contest introduces him to business concepts like venture capital. Later, a summer internship as a research assistant familiarizes him with the world of finance, and proximity to the business school puts him in contact with MBA students who help write his business plan. Although Tian’s own idea, a career services website geared toward Chinese college graduates, never left the ground, he was tapped to run a different internet startup. And while that venture also failed, Tian’s biography now proudly boasts the achievement of "first tasting the pains and pleasures of being a CEO at the age of twenty," a resume booster that will no doubt lead to additional employment opportunities down the road. In a reversal of early twentieth century attitudes toward education in America, Harvard Boy suggests that study abroad is worthwhile precisely because it provides concrete, practical skills.

Tian’s celebration of capital accumulation implicitly constructs study abroad as a threat to the Chinese state. Drawing on the work of Foucault, Ong and Nonini argue that contemporary Chinese citizens are subject to several overlapping "regimes of truth," including the family, the workplace and the nation-state. Each regime, they contend, "disciplines persons under its control in different ways to form acceptable and normal subjectivities." The nation-state, for example, deploys normalizing discourses of citizenship and nationhood to define and construct loyal national

137 Tian, Hafo xiaozi [Harvard Boy], cover insert.
subjects.\textsuperscript{139} Juxtaposed against the backdrop of the nation-state regime, Ong argues, are capitalist narratives of modernity, which celebrate self-propelling subjects.\textsuperscript{140}

As depicted in \textit{Harvard Boy}, study abroad provides overseas students with the "technologies of the self"\textsuperscript{141} necessary to become self-propelling subjects. For instance, a Harvard professor tells Tian that there is no such thing as chance or luck, insisting that success is due entirely to planning. Tian later adopts this worldview, claiming that unlike nature, which evolves randomly, humans evolve intentionally. He affirms his belief in this principle through behavior, constantly attempting to create new opportunities for himself. The implication that individuals are in control of their own fate, rather than subject to the will of the collective, represents a major challenge to state ideology.

Even more troubling to the state, study abroad leads Tian to question the value of financial success. He concludes \textit{Harvard Boy} with a conversation between himself and Eileen Chow, a Taiwan-educated professor of film studies at Harvard. While Chow may not make a lot of money, he claims, she is still a successful person, because she is doing something she loves. For the Chinese government, which instructs its subjects that "to get rich is glorious," this is an extremely dangerous view. In contemporary China, economic development is the closest thing that exists to a coherent state ideology. The Communist Party’s authority rests largely on its ability to grow the economy and improve standards of living. By questioning the value of making money, and by extension economic development, Tian undercutsthe

\textsuperscript{139} This formulation somewhat mirrors the Chinese concept of \textit{sixiang jiaoyu} ("thought education").
\textsuperscript{140} Ong, "Chinese Modernities," 173.
\textsuperscript{141} Woronov, "Chinese Children, American Education," 45.
legitimacy of Party rule. However, because he is an overseas student, the state is highly limited in its ability to discipline him. As Ong and Nonini point out, “the modern nation-state regime requires for its effects that the subjects its discourses and disciplines construct be generally localizable.” Study abroad threatens the state because it enables overseas students like Tian with the economic, social and symbolic capital necessary to evade localization.

**Strengthening China, Domesticating Study Abroad**

The career trajectories of Liu Yiting and Feng Jianmei further attest to the potentially destabilizing effects of study abroad. According to a 2003 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, by her senior year at Harvard, Liu had already landed a job with the Boston Consulting Group, one of the most prestigious consulting firms in the US. In the article, Liu professes a desire to return to China. To her interviewer, though, this seemed like “a rather vague goal.” For Feng, study abroad also helped secure a comfortable role in the global capitalist system. After graduating from Yale Law, she went to work for General Electric’s Asia-Pacific division in Hong Kong. For Feng, a native of Nanjing, this represented a significant move up the social hierarchy of space. Clearly, both authors accumulated large amounts of economic, social and symbolic capital while studying abroad. This capital enabled them to move outside the borders of China, where they are free to construct non-national identities and develop transnational allegiances. In the eyes of the state, this constructs study abroad as a potential threat.

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142 Ong and Nonini, “Chinese Transnationalism,” 23.
143 Jin-Liu, “China’s ‘Harvard Girl.’”
In *Harvard Girl* and *Yale’s Spirit*, Liu and Feng use a variety of discursive strategies intended to discourage this perception. Liu, for instance, affirms her commitment to China by renouncing capital accumulation. During her senior year of high school, Liu’s parents encouraged her to apply to both American and Chinese universities. Explaining this decision, Liu’s stepfather, Zhang Xinwu writes: “if [Yiting] is not accepted by a first-rate college, it will be better to not study in America at all.” 144 This argument constructs study abroad as an investment in Liu’s future, one in which only a “first-rate” American school can provide the necessary returns in educational and symbolic capital. In general, however, Liu and her parents present a more altruistic vision of study abroad. During her senior of high school, Liu attended a month-long exchange program in America, an experience she recounts in the penultimate chapter of *Harvard Girl*. The trip was organized by the Washington-Beijing Scholastic Exchange (WBSE), a non-profit organization dedicated to “promoting interaction between Chinese and American high school students and teachers and furthering understanding and friendship.” 145 To screen potential applicants, the program’s founder, an American lawyer named Larry Simms, invited Liu and four other classmates to participate in an English language interview. Before her interview, the seventeen year old Liu prepared a list of appropriate talking points. They included: “China and America have much history worth remembering; In the past, there existed friendship between the Chinese and American people, and in the future there will be an even greater need for friendship; and Americans have a great deal of experience carrying out modernization – China must follow along this effective

In choosing these topics, Liu constructs study abroad as a broad, public mission, one in which capital accumulation plays only a secondary role.

Feng Jianmei adopts a similar strategy, asserting that overseas students are not motivated by capital accumulation. In 2001, at the age of thirty-six, Feng spent a year in the LLM program at Yale Law School, an experience she recounts in Yale’s Spirit. Before going to America, she was already an established legal scholar and author in China. She decided to enroll in Yale Law because she wanted to expand her knowledge of the American legal system and broaden her research perspective, a form of educational capital accumulation. Although overseas students like herself stand to make personal gains, she argues, they ultimately have a baoguo xin – a desire to serve their country. She cites one friend in particular, a PhD candidate in biology who, despite having already published an article in the prestigious journal Nature, insists that “after finishing school, I will definitely go back to China to do a little something.” Here, Feng suggests that overseas students are dedicated to strengthening China, not just accumulating capital.

Liu and Feng emphasize this point by suggesting ways to strengthen and reform China. While visiting America, Liu attended St. Andrew’s, an elite private boarding school in Delaware. In Harvard Girl, she lavishes praise on the school’s facilities, particularly the large number of publicly accessible computers. This, she claims, reflects a more systematic commitment on the part of US schools to computer education. As further evidence, she cites US government proposals to provide every

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146 Ibid., 326.
147 Ibid., 229.
148 Liu actually describes the school as being located in the “Washington, DC area”
student with a laptop and every classroom with an internet connection. The situation in Chinese schools, she continues, contrasts sharply. There, a lack of adequate hardware and software ensures that most students graduate high school without a working knowledge of how to operate a computer. While acknowledging that St. Andrews, as the equivalent of a Chinese “key school,”\textsuperscript{149} may be slightly atypical of American schools in general, Liu still grossly exaggerates the breadth and depth of computer-based education in America. Later, the reason for her exaggeration becomes clear. Computers, she argues, are the driving force behind US economic development. In order to keep pace with America and the rest of the developed world, she implies, China must commit a similar level of time and resources to computer education as the US. Here, Liu situates contemporary study abroad squarely within the tradition of the May Fourth Movement, constructing overseas students as public intellectuals dedicated to strengthening China. Like Hu Shi, she uses the idea of an imagined America to highlight the need for reform in China.

Liu further constructs herself as a national strengthener by advocating changes in the Chinese education system. While studying at St. Andrew’s, she noticed that American schools group students according to ability, as well as age. By offering honors and advanced placement classes, she argues, American schools allow naturally gifted students to develop at an accelerated pace. In China, meanwhile, all students of the same age are placed in the same class, regardless of academic performance. This, Liu claims, has a negative impact on the brightest students, because it forces teachers

\textsuperscript{149} Public schools with generally superior resources that tend to place graduates in top universities. Students often have to take a placement exam and pay a fee in order to get in.
to move at a slower speed. For Liu, this is not simply a matter of maximizing individual potential, but a question of national importance: “A prerequisite for the Chinese people realizing their dream of becoming a world power is full development of the talent pool – to produce as quickly as possible a stream of outstanding talents.” Thus, the Chinese education system, which tends to impede the emergence of talent, is “not only bad for students' individual development, but also harmful to the rise of the Chinese nation (zhonghua minzu).” To solve this problem, she proposes the implementation of a US-style honors system. Doing so, she asserts, would create a pool of highly talented individuals capable of strengthening China. In this instance, Liu demonstrates how study abroad can suggest concrete, structural solutions to China’s problems.

Like Liu, Feng Jianmei constructs herself as a latter-day May Fourth intellectual. In addition to earning a degree, she argues, overseas students also absorb the “spirit” of their host institution. The spirit of Yale Law, she claims, can be characterized as “independence, freedom, democracy, equality and brotherhood,” principles that manifest themselves in a number of areas throughout academic and residential life. For instance, the commencement speaker and the topic of her speech are chosen by student vote, rather than school leaders. Also, Feng was surprised to note, many professors give self-scheduled, non-proctored exams, relying on students to police themselves against cheating. Most impressive, though, a variety of important

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150 Ibid., 350.
151 This term is sometimes translated as “nation” and other times as “race”. Liu’s use of zhonghua minzu, an ethnicity term, in the context of an argument about national development, has significant implications for the construction of Chinese identity, a topic I will take up in greater detail in chapter 3.
152 Feng, Yelu jingshen [Yale’s Spirit], 115.
issues, including dorm and study carrel assignments, invitations to special events, and membership in student government, are all decided via lottery. This, according to Feng, saves administrators and professors a great deal of time for teaching, reduces competition and conflict, and insures fair treatment for all students, regardless of skin color or nationality. Feng’s praise for the lottery system advances an implicit critique of Chinese legal thought. Traditionally, Chinese scholars have argued that the rule of good men is preferable to the rule of good laws. In the absence of a well-developed system of law, however, government is inherently susceptible to corruption and influence peddling. Feng implies that if China were to implement neutral, objective guidelines for official behavior, the functional equivalent of a lottery system, government would become more efficient and civilians would enjoy greater equality. Here, study abroad offers insight into an underlying source of American strength, providing Feng with a template for reforming China.

Although Feng and Liu posit a need for reform, they also evince a heightened sense of confidence in Chinese culture and the Chinese people. For instance, after making a lengthy comparison between Chinese and American students, Liu concludes that American students have generally higher quality (suzhi). However, she insists, “Chinese students are no less [naturally] intelligent than American and European students.” Instead, the differences in quality are due largely to the “reasonable objectives and efficient systems” implemented by American schools. As proof, she cites the example of Chinese Americans, “the best educated minority group in the US,

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154 Ibid., 354.
surpassing even the Jews.”155 Chinese Americans, she claims, are not only well-educated, but also economically successful, as evidenced by their dominance of Silicon Valley. Here, Liu inverts the hundred-year-old conclusion of Liang Qichao, who argued that Chinese people were unfit for life in America. Chinese people, she suggests, with their intelligence, penchant for hard work and inherent respect for education, are ideally suited to take advantage of the opportunities offered by America, a place where schools encourage students to fully develop their abilities. If Chinese schools were similarly geared toward cultivating talent, she implies, China would naturally rise to the top of the global order. In Liu’s view, China’s “backwardness” is simply a matter of bureaucratic mismanagement, rather than deep-seated, cultural weakness.

Liu’s argument reflects a widespread shift in Chinese attitudes toward the US that occurred during the mid-1990’s, best exemplified by the 1996 best-seller The China That Can Say No. The book’s authors, which included a newspaper reporter, a university lecturer, a poet, a freelance writer and several others, accused the US of actively plotting to obstruct China’s development. As evidence of the plot against China, they cite a variety of examples, including US weapons sales to Taiwan, opposition to China’s joining the World Trade Organization and Beijing’s blocked bid to host the 2000 Olympics. Like Harvard Girl, The China That Can Say No demonstrated a renewed sense of confidence in China. In an abrupt about face from

155 It is telling to note that Liu makes a claim about “Chinese students” based on the evidence of “Chinese Americans.” In order for the argument to hold, Chinese people living in China and Chinese people living in America must be fundamentally the same. This indicates that Liu believes in an essentialized, ethnic model of Chinese identity.
The River Elegy, an influential television documentary from the 1980’s,\(^\text{156}\) it portrayed Chinese culture as an enduring source of strength.\(^\text{157}\) For instance, the authors attribute contemporary Western hegemony to Chinese ingenuity, arguing that Europeans would not have been able to discover, explore and conquer Asia, Africa and the Americas without the aid of Chinese inventions like gunpowder and the compass. China’s present “backwardness,” they claim, is nothing more than a legacy of colonial exploitation. In the wake of Deng Xiaoping’s efforts to unleash the entrepreneurial energy of the Chinese people, they continue, China stands poised to reemerge as a global power. As such, they advocate, China should take a more aggressive stance vis-à-vis the West: “In our interactions with Westerners, we have already paid a century's worth of tuition, this is enough.”\(^\text{158}\) In the future, Chinese leaders should “reject the West’s unreasonable demands, at the same time expressing their own position and attitude.”\(^\text{159}\) These arguments strongly evoke the late nineteenth century ti/yong dichotomy. Once again, Chinese intellectuals recognize the need to learn from the West. At the same time, they feel uneasy over the social and cultural changes wrought by Westernization. To resolve this dilemma, they affirm their belief in Chinese exceptionalism, which is rooted in an unchanging, essentialized notion of Chinese culture. In order to maintain this exceptionalism, they argue, it is necessary for China

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\(^\text{156}\) The documentary is widely seen as a rejection of Chinese culture, depicting China’s voluminous historical and cultural legacy as a burden on the present.

\(^\text{157}\) The authors are somewhat contradictory on this point. While drawing on historical examples to illustrate China’s inherent strength, they also criticize contemporary Chinese people for living in the past, arguing: “History represents the past. However, we are living in the present and the future. Focusing on the past while ignoring the present does not help the world understand China (281).”

\(^\text{158}\) Song et. al., Zhongguo keyi shuo bu [The China that Can Say No], 214.

\(^\text{159}\) Ibid.
to retain its core values and principles. Rather than copying the West, they suggest, China should pursue a hybrid model of modernity.

More than a decade after the publication of the *China That Can Say No*, overseas students like Feng Jianmei continue to call for modernization without westernization. While studying at Yale, Feng was dismayed to find how little most Americans know about the Chinese legal system. For example, in a discussion on human rights, one classmate insinuates that China does not have a constitution. While China may not have a constitutional court, Feng writes, it certainly has a constitution. This encounter leads her to suggest that overseas students can serve as a bridge between China and the West, encouraging “interaction, understanding and communication.”

Feng offers herself as an example, arguing that her presence at Yale allowed her classmates to “vividly experience a Chinese legal scholar’s diligent pursuit of a modern, rational, well-developed system of law.” Here, Feng treats study abroad as a platform for educating Americans about China, rather than an opportunity for Chinese students to learn about America. Along the same lines, she stresses the notion that study abroad provides overseas students with an “international perspective (shijie de yanguang),” rather than knowledge of America per se. In a chapter on the US-China Law Center, a Yale-based organization devoted to Chinese

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160 Feng, *Yale’s Spirit*, 233.
161 Ibid. This is yet another expression of Feng’s desire to strengthen the rule of law, what many would consider a vaguely “Western” value. Here, however, she subtly constructs it as a Chinese value, suggesting that her commitment to the rule of law pre-dates the experience of study abroad. Study abroad, she implies, did not instill this goal, but simply facilitated her efforts to realize it.
162 Ibid., 173.
legal reform, she praises the practice of bringing visiting scholars to America. Quoting a Chinese student familiar with the program, she writes:

[the visiting scholars] see how America does things, and also understand the situation in China, which allows them to take American things and turn them thoroughly into Chinese things. China’s legal development depends on Chinese scholars. In the end, the people capable of truly changing China are still these Chinese scholars.\textsuperscript{163}

This passage reflects one of the main themes of \textit{The China That Can Say No}, the notion that only Chinese people know what is best for China. Like Feng, contemporary Chinese officials and private citizens alike regularly insist that what is appropriate for the West is not necessarily appropriate for China.\textsuperscript{164} Though the US can serve as a model of economic success, they argue, China must ultimately follow its own course.

While reflecting China’s newfound economic and military strength, Liu’s decision to adopt the role of modernizing intellectual is an essentially traditional strategy for constructing overseas students as loyal national subjects. Study abroad, Liu and Feng suggest, provides overseas students with insight into the sources of American power, both structural and spiritual. By using this knowledge to strengthen China, they demonstrate a continued commitment to China’s well-being. To the state, this implies that study abroad is a safe practice.

\textbf{Study Abroad as Suzhi Jiaoyu}

In addition to casting overseas students as modernizing intellectuals, Liu and Feng also employ a novel strategy for linking study abroad to national development.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 172.

\textsuperscript{164} The most prominent examples, of course, being democracy and free speech.
This strategy draws on the concept of suzhi jiaoyu, "education for quality." In 1996, the authors of The China That Can Say No offered a cautiously optimistic assessment of China's economic prospects. While confidently predicting that the twenty-first century would belong to China, they also cautioned that China's ascendancy was by no means inevitable. For China to become the next global superpower, they argued, the Chinese people would have to undergo a program of character reform. In 1999, the government inscribed this view into official policy, promulgating a series of education reforms designed to cultivate suzhi (often translated as "quality") in Chinese children. According to then prime minister Zhu Rongji, the new suzhi jiaoyu would help China "rapidly carry out our nation's modernization, radically strengthen our ability to compete internationally, and greet the new century's opportunities and challenges." During two years of field work in Beijing, Woronov found pervasive evidence of this attitude at the popular level: "absolutely everyone I ever spoke with in Beijing believed strongly that suzhi is far too low in China, and that the quality of the population - especially children - urgently needs to be raised to enable the nation to meet the challenges of the future." As these examples attest, both official and popular discourses on suzhi jiaoyu posit a link between population quality and national strength. It follows that when individual citizens cultivate suzhi, they effectively strengthen China.

165 Some scholars render suzhi jiaoyu as 'quality education,' a more direct translation of the Chinese original. Woronov argues that this is inappropriate, because the reforms are directed at raising the quality of the nation's children, rather than the quality of the education system.
The concept of *suzhi jiaoyu* enables overseas student authors to posit an ontological link between study abroad and strengthening China. In *Harvard Girl*, Liu Weihua and Zhang Xinwu construct Liu Yiting as a national strengthener simply by calling her a high-quality subject. They first posit Liu’s quality in the book’s sub-heading, “a true account of *suzhi* cultivation.” To substantiate this claim, Liu Weihua reprints the full, translated text of Liu’s Harvard acceptance letter. According to the admissions committee, what distinguished Liu and other admitted students from the applicant pool were their "outstanding quality (*youxiu suzhi*) and overall abilities." This frames “outstanding *suzhi*” as a prerequisite for study abroad, implying that overseas students are necessarily high-quality subjects. If study abroad is an affirmation of pre-existing *suzhi*, it follows that overseas students do not have to do anything *for* China in order to strengthen China. Simply by becoming overseas students, they are helping China “meet the challenges of the future.”

Critics of *Harvard Girl* have questioned this logic, arguing that Liu Yiting is not a true exemplar of *suzhi*. In 2004, for instance, Xiao Yu, a former cultural reporter for CCTV, published *The True Story of Harvard Girl Liu Yiting*, a self-described attempt to “throw cold water” on the Harvard Girl myth. In the book’s introduction, Xiao discourages Chinese parents from imitating Liu Weihua and Zhang Xinwu’s

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168 Liu and Zhang, *Harvard Girl*, 8. Although it is difficult to guess the wording of the English original, it seems highly likely that the committee would have used a phrase along the lines of ‘outstanding qualities,’ which could have just as easily been translated as *youdian*, rather than *suzhi*. By using *suzhi*, Liu Weihua explicitly invokes the discursive meanings associated with the term, imbuing Yiting’s acceptance with nationalist overtones.

169 My analysis of this aspect of the discourse on study abroad was inspired by private correspondence with Andy Chih-ming Wang of National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan.

parenting style. Firstly, he argues, every child has a unique personality, and thus requires a different type of “family education (jiating jiaoyu).” More importantly, though, he stresses, Liu Yiting is simply not worth emulating. Contrary to her parents’ claims, he insists, Liu did not get into Harvard because of her “well-rounded suzhi and extraordinary abilities.” Instead, she was just an ordinary, obedient, rule-abiding girl who had the material and emotional support necessary to succeed in the “game (boyi)” of college admissions.

*Harvard Girl* provides ample evidence in support of Xiao’s conclusion. As the book openly acknowledges, Liu’s entire pre and post-adolescent life were carefully orchestrated by her parents. Whenever she faced a decision, her family would gather together to discuss their options and decide on the best course of action. Before interviewing with Larry Simms, for instance, Liu’s step-father advised her to discuss the topic of Sino-American relations, laying the groundwork for her eventual acceptance. Also, in the book’s final chapter, an account of Liu’s college application process written by Zhang Xinwu, Liu appears as little more than an automaton. The first hurdle, Zhang writes, was the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), a major obstacle for prospective overseas students. In preparation, he makes Liu memorize an entire book of advanced English vocabulary. After passing easily, Liu begins filling out the rest of her applications. The biggest problem, Zhang recalls, was time, as she also had to study for the *gaokao*, the grueling Chinese college entrance exam. For two months, he claims, Liu only slept three or four hours a night. It was

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171 Ibid.
her determination, perseverance, and ability to endure physical hardship, he reflects,\textsuperscript{172} that enabled her to complete the applications on time. Given these circumstances, it is questionable whether Liu’s admission to Harvard can accurately be characterized as a reflection of well-rounded \textit{suzhi}.

At issue between the two sides of this debate is the meaning of \textit{suzhi}. As Woronov notes, \textit{suzhi} is a highly flexible term, alternately used to refer to children’s educational level, morality, height, bodily strength or patriotism. Official discourse defines \textit{suzhi jiaoyu} only in relation to its effects. That is, at a discursive level, cultivating \textit{suzhi} is interchangeable with strengthening China. Unfortunately, official discourse leaves the question of how to cultivate \textit{suzhi}, as well what specific qualities need to be cultivated, largely unspecified. Like many Chinese parents, Liu Weihua and Zhang Xinwu resolve this dilemma by turning to America. For them, Woronov suggests, “Harvard is a symbol that condenses the educational processes that produce America’s global strength and power.”\textsuperscript{173} Because Harvard produces quality, they believe, only students with well-rounded \textit{suzhi} are worthy of admission. Since Liu Yiting was admitted to Harvard, it follows that she must be a high-quality student.

Xiao’s criticism, meanwhile, is rooted in a different notion of \textit{suzhi}. High-quality subjects, he argues, possess a specific set of character attributes – creativity, independence and social adroitness. Only people who possess these qualities, he suggests, are truly capable of strengthening China. Given this definition, simply being admitted to an American university, no matter how prestigious, does not affirm \textit{suzhi}.

\textsuperscript{172} Throughout the book, Zhang and Liu Weihua describe in detail their methods for instilling these qualities. In one commonly referenced antidote, for instance, they forced the young Liu to hold ice cubes in her hand until they melted.

\textsuperscript{173} Woronov, “Chinese Children, American Education,” 40.
Instead, overseas students must actively demonstrate their ability to create value for society.

While questioning the wholesale characterization of overseas students as national strengtheners, Xiao’s notion of *suzhi* does not reject the link between study abroad and strengthening China. As depicted in *Harvard Girl, Harvard Boy* and *Yale’s Spirit*, study abroad not only affirms Xiao’s notion of *suzhi*, but also cultivates it. In *Yale’s Spirit*, for example, Feng notes that Yale is currently the top-ranked law school in America. To Chinese readers, this implies that Yale Law is the ultimate arbiter of *suzhi*, even more than Harvard. Feng goes on to assert that the two schools cultivate fundamentally different kinds of quality, as evidenced by students’ career paths. While Harvard graduates tend to go into corporate law, she asserts, Yale graduates generally become public servants. To bolster this claim, she interviews various Yale students, all of whom insist that Yale Law inspires devotion to the public good. This implies that Chinese students who attend Yale absorb not just the spirit of equality and democracy, but also a sense of social responsibility. As such, Chinese graduates will naturally want to address China’s myriad social problems. Liu lends official support to this view by printing the text of an interview she conducted with Richard Levin, president of Yale. In the interview, Levin says he is very pleased that more and more Chinese students are engaging in community service and choosing to return home to China after graduation. Moreover, by emphasizing Yale Law’s number one ranking, Feng encourages readers to assume it is the standard to which all other universities aspire. In this way, Feng extends her claim to include graduates of other schools, implying that study abroad in general inspires dedication to China.
*Harvard Girl*, meanwhile, suggests that study abroad provides overseas students with the tools necessary to strengthen China. At the end of her trip to America, Liu reflects: “what left the strongest impression was not the things you could immediately see, like America's development and wealth.” Instead, she was struck by two questions: what kind of person does it take to produce such wealth, and how are such people cultivated? To answer these questions, she looked to the American education system. Homework in America, she suggests, is different than homework in China. Rather than reproduce a single, correct answer, American students are expected to conduct research and arrive at independent conclusions. Also, American schools make great efforts to instill confidence in their students. St. Andrew's, for example, awards a large number of prizes, many of which are unrelated to academics. This, Liu claims, gives all students a sense of confidence and achievement, regardless of academic performance. Overall, *Harvard Girl* suggests, American schools foster creativity, independence and confidence, the very same traits widely identified by Xiao, the authors of *The China That Can Say No* and others as central to strengthening China. Even if prospective overseas students lack these traits before going to America, Liu implies, study abroad promises to instill them. In this sense, study abroad is the ultimate form of *suzhi jiaoyu*.

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175 Liu uses “America” synonymously with “St. Andrews.” Overseas student authors frequently fall victim to this tendency, making broad, national generalization based on local experience. This tends to reify the distinction between Chinese Self and American Other, simultaneously flattening the differences among Chinese people. As I will argue in Chapter 3, this strategy strengthens the position of the Chinese state and helps overseas students recover a sense of belonging.
By constructing study abroad as an instance of suzhi jiaoyu, Liu and Feng cast overseas students as loyal national subjects, further pre-empting perception of threat on the part of the Chinese state. In the process of accumulating educational and social capital, they suggest, overseas students also cultivate the desire and ability to strengthen China. Tian Ye's experience attests to this possibility. In the beginning of Harvard Boy, he professes only a weak sense of obligation toward China. Ideally, he claims, "my work would be in China. This way, I could visit my parents more frequently, and the work I did would still count toward China's GDP. Of course, if I went to work in another country for a few years, that would also be pleasant." Moreover, he uses the language of economics, rather than social utility, to justify his decision to start a business in China, arguing he simply saw an unexploited niche in the Chinese market. Although he was not motivated by a sense of patriotic duty, Tian nonetheless created value for Chinese society. As Harvard Boy suggests, it was the experience of study abroad that provided the educational, social and symbolic capital necessary to do so. Although study abroad facilitates capital accumulation and value reconsideration, Tian's example demonstrates, it still encourages behavior fundamentally in line with the interests of the state.

Conclusion

As I have shown, contemporary overseas student memoirs continue to assert a link between study abroad and national development. As a form of transnational practice that facilitates capital accumulation and identity reconsideration outside the bounds of state control, study abroad poses an implicit threat to the Chinese state. By

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celebrating capital accumulation, Tian Ye’s *Harvard Boy* encourages this perception. In contrast, Liu Yiting’s *Harvard Girl* and Feng Jianmei’s *Yale’s Spirit* mitigate it, constructing overseas students as loyal national subjects. Liu and Feng achieve this effect by casting overseas students as modernizing intellectuals and framing study abroad as an instance of *suzhi jiaoyu*. In the process, they posit a vision of Chinese identity that is rooted in China as both place and political entity, a question to which I will now turn in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3: Study Abroad and Chinese Identity

Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine how Liu, Feng and Tian manipulate the discourse on Chinese identity to construct overseas students as loyal Chinese subjects. As Brenda Chan has noted, participants in the discourse on Chinese identity draw on several competing notions of Chineseness. In official discourse, “Chinese” is a national identity. That is, all people living within the borders of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)\(^{177}\) are Chinese, regardless of ethnic and cultural background.\(^{178}\) Under this definition, ethnic minorities like Uighurs,\(^{179}\) who practice Islam and speak a language that is linguistically unrelated to Mandarin,\(^{180}\) would still be considered Chinese.\(^{181}\) However, as Edgar Wickberg argues, “Chinese” is not just a citizenship term, but also an ethnicity.\(^{182}\) Throughout the world, there are millions of people who, despite having lived their entire lives outside the borders of the PRC, identify as Chinese. For these people, the civic and territorial definition of Chinese identity is

\(^{177}\) In most discussions, people simply refer to the PRC as “China.” As I will argue later, this convention has significant implications for the discourse on Chinese identity.


\(^{179}\) The most populous ethnic group in Xinjiang, a province in Northwestern China. While the government in Beijing claims that the region has always been a part of China, its historical ties to the Chinese empire are highly disputed.

\(^{180}\) Uighur is part of the Altaic language family. Thus, it is related to Turkish and other Central Asian languages. Mandarin, Cantonese and other Chinese dialects are members of the Sino-Tibetan family.

\(^{181}\) As Chan suggests, there are obvious political reasons for the Communist Party’s decision to uphold this definition of Chinese identity.

inadequate.\(^{183}\) Instead, their sense of Chinese identity is rooted in Han ethnicity, what Chan refers to as “a cultural genealogical identity based on common descent from the Yellow Emperor.”\(^{184}\) This notion of Chineseness emphasizes blood ties over place ties, encompassing ethnically Chinese people the world over.

Still others posit Chineseness as a cultural identity. During the mid 1990’s, Taiwan-educated academic Tu Wei-ming popularized this concept, arguing that the “Sinic world” consists not only of people in the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, but also overseas Chinese who retain an emotional attachment to China.\(^{185}\) This model links Chinese identity to everyday practices like eating Chinese food, speaking a Chinese dialect, and practicing Chinese values. Although the cultural model, which relies on a fixed, monolithic understanding of what constitutes Chinese culture, has since fallen out of favor in Western academic circles, it remains popular among self-identified Chinese people. In his study of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver, for instance, Wickberg found that “there persists among globally resident persons of Chinese background the notion of some kind of ‘Chineseness’...It seems that there should be some discernible characteristics – an essential, or essentialized – something called ‘Chineseness:’ something in their hybridity that is classifiable as somehow ‘Chinese.’”\(^{186}\) The desire to replicate this presumed cultural identity encourages immigrant parents to send their children to heritage schools, where they are taught to

\(^{183}\) This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in Southeast Asian, where ethnic Chinese citizens often view themselves as different from the local population. Given that many of their families immigrated to the region hundreds of years ago, long before the PRC even existed, it is clear that their sense of Chinese identity is not rooted in the PRC state.

\(^{184}\) Chan, “Virtual Communities,” 7.

\(^{185}\) Tu, “Cultural China,” 1-35.

engage in what Sun Wanning refers to as “the everyday practices of being Chinese.”

Advocates of the cultural model believe that by engaging in these practices it is possible to maintain a Chinese identity outside the borders of China.

Given the contested meaning of Chineseness, word choice plays an exceedingly important role in the discourse on Chinese identity. Take, for instance, the word “China.” The most widely used Chinese-language equivalent is zhongguo, “middle kingdom.” Beginning in the Yuan dynasty and up through the early twentieth century, the term zhongguo referred to imperial China, the unified political entity situated in the present-day PRC. Though it signified a territorial entity, zhongguo also had a distinctly cultural flavor. As Jerome Ch’en has argued, as late as the nineteenth century, imperial China had neither clearly defined international boundaries nor a concept of nationality. Instead, “‘China’ was the land where the Chinese lived; ‘the Chinese’ were that people which adhered to a certain distinct set of values and norms suited to their way of life.” The PRC, the modern state founded in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party, is officially called the Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo. For both convenience and political reasons, however, most people simply refer to it as Zhongguo. Doing so subtly positions the PRC as the successor to imperial China, conflating a relatively young, civic and territorial entity with a trans-historical, cultural one. Given the history of the term zhongguo, this usage perpetuates a culturally-based understanding of Chinese identity, one that is often at odds with official PRC rhetoric.

Participants in the discourse on Chinese identity draw on a similarly complex, highly articulated vocabulary for referring to Chinese people. A number of different

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188 Ch’en, China and the West, 25.
Mandarin phrases can all be translated into English as “Chinese person,” each invoking a slightly different notion of Chinese identity. The two most common terms are *huaren* (‘hua person’) and *Zhongguoren* (‘person of Zhongguo’). *Huaren* references the ancient *huaxia* tribe, supposed ancestors of the Han people. Thus, it suggests a blood-based model of Chinese identity. *Zhongguoren*, meanwhile, references the PRC, positing Chinese as a national identity. Accordingly, ethnically Chinese people living abroad are most often referred to as some variant of *huaren*, including *huaqiao* (lit. “sojourning huaren,” a citizen of the PRC living in a foreign country), *huayi* (person descended from a *hua* person), or *haiwai huaren* (an overseas *huaren*). Because there is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes Chinese, participants in the discourse on Chinese identity can manipulate these terms in order to achieve their political and economic goals. For example, in hopes of attracting more traffic from ethnically Chinese Singaporeans, a Chinese-language website based in Singapore changed the wording of its mission statement from “unite all *Zhongguoren*” to “gathering all *huaren*.”

In what follows, I will analyze the version of Chinese identity on offer in overseas student memoirs, paying careful attention to language choice and its implications. I will suggest that overseas student authors construct Chineseness as a cultural identity, placing particular emphasis on the behavioral expression of enduring Chinese values. This shift away from an essentialized, biological notion of Chinese identity forces overseas students to once again perform Chineseness. However, electronic communication, ready access to Chinese cultural products, and official

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189 Chan, “Virtual Communities,” 20.
multiculturalism make it easier than ever for them to maintain a strong sense of Chinese identity. Because it can be performed almost anywhere in the world, this version of Chinese identity is, to some extent, de-territorialized. However, I will argue that in overseas student memoirs, Chinese identity is still grounded in a particular sense of place. I will then go on to examine the impact of overseas student memoirs on the broader discourse on Chinese identity, arguing that such memoirs foster transnational consciousness, define transnational practice as an essential component of Chinese modernity, posit the existence of a pan-Chinese identity, and naturalize allegiance to the PRC as a dimension of Chinese cultural identity. Finally, I will argue that overseas student authors pursue this version of Chinese identity for a mix of psychological and economic reasons.

Transnationalism With Chinese Characteristics

In overseas student memoirs, “Chinese” is a kind of cultural identity. When Liu Yiting first arrives in the US, she is shocked by how little her classmates know about China. For instance, several ask her whether the clothes she wears in America are the same as the ones she wears at home, leading her to suggest “I would have to wear a Manchu style jacket and bind my feet in order to match the image in their heads.”¹⁹⁰ To correct these misperceptions, she decides to educate Americans about the “real China (zhenshi de zhongguo).”¹⁹¹ This term is slightly ambiguous, as it could refer to either historical China or the PRC. Liu’s approach to educating Americans about the “real China” includes handing out gifts – a book of folk tales, Sichuan style

¹⁹¹ Ibid.
embroidery and cut paper, landscape paintings and various other handicrafts – and
giving lectures on Chinese customs. According to Liu, the gifts and lectures will help
her classmates better understand China’s “long history and abundant culture.”\(^{192}\) As
this statement implies, Liu’s concept of China extends beyond the sixty year history of
the PRC. She drives home the point with a discussion of her favorite gift, a jade
abacus her mother bought for Larry Simms. The abacus, Liu Weihua claims, is “a
symbol of the Chinese people’s (zhongguo ren)\(^{193}\) spiritual character, a representative
of China’s ancient civilization and evidence of the Chinese people’s intelligence.”\(^{194}\)
For Liu and her parents, the “real China” is historical China. Their sense of Chinese
identity is tied to a trans-historical body of intellectual and cultural achievements, not
simply the modern Communist Party state.

Overseas student authors also construct Chineseness as a set of essentialized
values and behaviors. In *Harvard Boy*, for example, Tian Ye suggests that
immigration to America leads to only a partial transformation in Chinese children.
Because children are highly flexible, he claims, the influence of American society will
encourage them to adopt new habits (*xiguan*). However, he goes on, these children
will continue to uphold “the strong points of the Chinese people (*huaren*), like hard
work and emphasis on the family.”\(^{195}\) Here, Tian implies that all Chinese people share
a common set of values. Regardless of local environment, he suggests, these values
manifest themselves in the form of recognizably “Chinese” behaviors. In *Yale’s Spirit*,

\(^{192}\) Ibid.

\(^{193}\) Interestingly, Liu uses *zhongguoren*, rather than *huaren*, in this discussion of
historical China. This further suggests that she sees the PRC as an extension of
historical China.

\(^{194}\) Ibid.

\(^{195}\) Tian, *Harvard Boy*, 82.
Feng Jianmei makes a similar claim about the essentialized nature of Chinese identity. At the end of her year at Yale, she reflects: “my classmates’, friends’, and teachers’ affection and admiration for me were nothing more than respect and admiration for Eastern civilization. I believe that, from head to toe, in both word and deed, I was the image of a typical Chinese female intellectual.” Ultimately, Feng implies, the marks of Chineseness are “words and deeds,” expressions of underlying Chinese values.

These arguments evidence another shift in the discourse on Chinese identity. As I noted in chapter one, prior to the twentieth century, the prevailing model of Chinese identity was culturalist. Any group of people who adhered to Confucian practice could become “Chinese,” regardless of ethnicity. Throughout history, this enabled foreign invaders like the Mongols and the Manchus to gain political legitimacy by gradually adapting to Confucian culture. Emperor Kangxi, for example, an early leader of the ethnically Manchurian Qing Dynasty, won the support of Han intellectuals by consciously adopting the pose of a Confucian “sage king.” As in the case of Yung Wing, however, the process could also work in the opposite direction. Though ethnically Han, Yung was accused of being a “fake Chinese” because he adopted American habits while studying abroad. He was able to re-assert his Chinese

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196 Feng, *Yale’s Spirit*, 212.
197 As Spence points out, Confucianism was not a static, unchanging tradition. Although Confucius lived during the 5th century B.C., his works were not grouped into the canonical “Five Classics and Four Books” until centuries later. Moreover, Spence notes, “over the ensuing centuries this body of material was swollen by floods of commentaries, glosses and reinterpretations, and modified in subtle ways by elements drawn from the Buddhist faith...and from other traditions within Chinese philosophy (The Search For Modern China, 60).” While the specific meaning of Confucianism changed over time, the belief that Confucianism constituted an essential component of Chinese culture remained constant. By studying the Confucian classics, learning Chinese calligraphy and holding bureaucratic examinations, Spence argues, Kangxi co-opted a traditional source of political legitimacy.
identity by obeying his mother and shaving off his mustache, an affirmation of commitment to Confucian morality. This performative model of Chinese identity held sway for much of the early twentieth century, as evidenced by the suspicion with which overseas students like Hu Shi were regarded upon their return to China. By the early 1990’s, however, the prevailing model of Chinese identity had undergone an almost complete reversal. In *Chinese Students Encounter America*, for example, Qian Ning likened Chineseness to “the color of one’s skin,” arguing that even if overseas students adopt American habits, cut ties with family members in the PRC, and choose to live in America permanently, they are still Chinese. Like Tian and Feng, Qian defined Chineseness as an essential characteristic. However, his model of Chinese identity was explicitly national, linking “consciousness of being Chinese”¹⁹⁸ to emotional attachment to the PRC. Such a definition necessarily excluded people from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as ethnically Chinese citizens of other countries. The intervening years have seen the re-emergence of a performative model of Chinese identity. For Liu, Tian and Feng, Chinese identity transcends national borders.¹⁹⁹ Because their notion of Chineseness is characterized by an emotional attachment to historical China and “Chinese” cultural practices, it is available to all ethnically Chinese people, regardless of location or national affiliation. With its emphasis on behavior, this model divorces Chineseness from biology. As proof, in 1997, Wang Gungwu, a Singapore-based scholar of the Chinese Diaspora, argued that the label “overseas Chinese” should not be applied to those people, “whatever their

¹⁹⁸ Qian, *Chinese Students*, 165.
¹⁹⁹ Note Tian’s shift from the use of the term *zhongguo haizi*, which uses the Chinese state as a point of reference, to *huaren*, a non-territorial category of ethnicity, in the quote on the previous page.
descent, who deny that they are Chinese and have nothing to do with the rituals, practices and institutions associated with the Chinese." Though rooted in ethnicity, Chinese identity must once again be sustained performatively.

A number of recent developments have made it easier than ever for overseas students to maintain a Chinese identity. For one, electronic communication, especially e-mail, allows them to maintain social relationships with family and friends in China. In *Harvard Girl*, Liu Yiting receives a free e-mail address from her host school in America. She “immediately used this address to send my faraway mom and dad a brief letter, and just a few hours later I received a response. This was the first time in my life I ever sent an E-mail.” By facilitating constant communication with her parents, e-mail enables Liu to maintain the role of dutiful, obedient daughter, the same role she had occupied while living in China. Thus, in her parents’ eyes, study abroad entailed merely a change of place, rather than a fundamental shift in identity. This episode contrasts sharply with the experience of Yung Wing, who, upon returning to China after six years in America, had to prove his Chineseness to his own mother. A second factor that allows overseas students to sustain a Chinese identity is the ease and speed of international air travel. This, coupled with the rising income of the Chinese middle class, enables overseas students to stay more physically connected to the PRC. Both Tian Ye and Feng Jianmei, for example, fly home to China on school breaks. More than electronic communication, international travel facilitates the maintenance of existing social relationships. Unlike the narrator of *The Ice River in the Jungle*, the

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200 Wang, *Don’t Leave Home*, 186.
current generation of overseas students see study abroad as an extension of their old lives in China, rather than a decisive break with the past.

Yet another way in which overseas students engage in the everyday practice of being Chinese is through consumption of Chinese-language media and cultural products. As Sun argues, consumption of Chinese-language media “gives diasporic individuals a chance to affirm, on a daily basis, their cultural and social loyalty, thereby carving a diasporic subject position of difference.”

For instance, while studying at Harvard, Tian Ye frequently rents Chinese movies from a video store in Chinatown. As president of the China Current Student Society, a group “devoted to raising the influence of Chinese culture at Harvard,” he arranges weekly public screenings of these movies. Attending the screenings not only puts Tian in direct physical contact with fellow Chinese nationals, but also localizes him within the “imaginary geography” of the PRC. In this way, consuming Chinese-language media helps recreate the experience of living in China. Although Chinese-language newspapers, books, movies and other cultural products have been available outside China for many years, the advent of satellite television, video and DVD technology and, most importantly, the internet, has dramatically increased the volume of Chinese-language media accessible to overseas Chinese audiences. Sun, a Chinese expatriate living in Australia, describes the effect of these developments on overseas Chinese identity: “confronted with endless media choices, my dilemma is not whether I can

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202 Sun, “Media and the Chinese Diaspora,” 74.
203 Tian, Harvard Boy, 77.
204 Sun, “Media and the Chinese Diaspora,” 74.
continue to be Chinese in another country, but how Chinese or what kind of Chinese I want to be.”

A fourth factor that facilitates the maintenance of Chinese identity among overseas students is the official rhetoric of multiculturalism promulgated by host countries like Canada, the US and Australia. In 1971, Canada, for instance, declared itself an officially “multicultural” country, a cultural “mosaic” in which various national and ethnic groups each play a valuable role. This re-imagining of Canadian identity, part of a large-scale effort to encourage immigration, supported the preservation of immigrants’ presumed native cultures. As Wang notes, the discourse on multiculturalism has had a significant impact on overseas Chinese.

Whereas previous generations of immigrants were expected to assimilate into the host culture, “there is now an intermediate position in which shades of ethnic identifications are allowed... The Chinese can keep much of their culture, provided they show political loyalty to their new country.” This, in turn, has led to a shift in expectations among overseas students. In the 1988, for example, the narrator of *The Ice River in the Jungle* expresses a strong desire to transform herself into a “blond-haired, blue-eyed American.” Although she eventually abandons this goal, she nevertheless adopts an in-between identity, neither fully Chinese nor fully American. Fifteen years later, Tian Ye comes to a similar conclusion about the prospects of assimilation. No Chinese person, he argues, is capable of “truly identifying with the

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205 Ibid., 68.
207 Wang, *Don’t Leave Home*, 78.
underlying logic"\textsuperscript{208} of American society. Unlike Zha’s narrator, however, he maintains an unambiguously Chinese identity: “As all clever and honest Chinese people know, as long as you acknowledge the differences in cultural background and habits on both sides... it is not difficult to form genuine friendships with civilized Americans.”\textsuperscript{209} Here, Tian advocates approaching Americans from a position of difference, rather than identification. His call for \textit{qiutong cunyi}, “seeking common ground while retaining independence,” reflects an internalization of the discourse on multiculturalism. Rather than attempt to become an American, he is comfortable retaining as “Chinese” a lifestyle as possible. By lending official sanction to the practice of speaking a Chinese language, eating Chinese food and consuming Chinese cultural products, the discourse on multiculturalism makes this a viable option.

The ease with which students and other overseas Chinese are able to perform Chinese identity while living abroad has led some scholars to posit the “de-territorialization” of Chineseness. In \textit{Ungrounded Empires}, for instance, Ong and Nonini question “the relationship between the study of Chinese identities and the place-bound theorizations of a preglobal social science, implied in such terms as \textit{territory, region, nationality} and \textit{ethnicity}.”\textsuperscript{210} National discourses of modernity, Ong argues, seek to construct “appropriate national subjects who are culturally homogenous, biopoliticized, and localized within the national territory...”\textsuperscript{211} However, she continues, the rise of electronic communication, the spread of global capitalism and the diffusion of mass culture have led to the emergence of

\textsuperscript{208} Tian, \textit{Harvard Boy}, 83.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{210} Ong and Nonini, “Chinese Transnationalism,” 5.
\textsuperscript{211} Ong, “Chinese Modernities,” 172.
“transnational publics.” Exposure to “different flows of information, images, ideas and people” provides members of these transnational publics with “alternatives to state ideologies for remaking identity.” These alternative discourses of identity “celebrate subjects in Diaspora and the ways their hybridity and flexibility suggest transnational solidarities.”

Exchange student memoirs support Ong and Nonini’s assertion that transnational practice enables PRC citizens to develop hybrid identities localized outside the national territory. In *Harvard Boy*, for instance, Tian Ye argues that Chinese students in America tend to interact mainly with people of the “same kind (tonglei).” *Tonglei*, he elaborates, can mean *tong yige chengshi qu de*, “from the same hometown,” as well as *tong shi zhongguo de*, “Chinese.” However, he continues, it also includes “Asian people who can speak Chinese,” “other foreign exchange students,” and “American classmates who are especially interested in Chinese culture.” Here, Tian posits an identity rooted in experience, rather than place of origin. Although he does not share a homeland with some of the people he characterizes as *tonglei*, they are nonetheless linked by common language, common outsider status in America, and common cultural reference points. For Feng, study abroad leads to a similar shift in identity. When she first arrives in America, she anticipates little risk of experiencing an identity crisis, arguing: “I always knew clearly that my roots were in China, my family was in China.” By the end of her second semester at Yale, however, she regular refers to her classmates as an “international

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214 Feng, *Yale’s Spirit*, 40.
family.” Given her belief in the relationship between identity, “roots” and family, Yale naturally begins to challenge China as a source of collective identification. In letters to former classmates, for instance, she notices herself using the verb *hui* (“to go back”),\(^{215}\) rather than *qu* (“to go”), to describe an upcoming visit to New Haven. Moreover, after returning to China, she compares herself and other graduates of Yale Law to *haiwai youzi*, “children working far away from home.”\(^{216}\) In this formulation, Feng inverts the typical orientation of the *nei/wai* (inside/outside) dichotomy, using Yale, rather than China, as the point of reference. Even though she is physically in China, she is still *zaiwai* with respect to Yale. Like Tian, study abroad makes Feng see herself as a member of a heterogeneous, transnational collective.

At the same time, exchange student memoirs call into question Ong and Nonini’s assertion that Chineseness is de-territorialized. Although it is possible to perform Chineseness almost anywhere in the world, Chinese identity is still strongly connected to China as a physical space. In *Harvard Girl*, for example, Zhang Xinwu lavishes praise on Qin, a Chinese American girl who helps Liu Yiting prepare for her Harvard admissions interview. Despite having grown up in America, Qin still speaks fluent Mandarin. This leads Zhang to reflect: “Behind Qin, I could imagine her parents – although they had migrated to a foreign land, they still felt a deep sentimental attachment to their native soil (*gutu*).”\(^{217}\) Here, Zhang’s use of *gutu* belies a place-based understanding of Chinese identity. It implies that overseas Chinese like Qin’s

\(^{215}\) In Chinese, speakers use only the verb *hui* to describe the action of going home, and never *qu*. Thus, an American student living in China, for example, cannot say “*qu America,*” only “*hui America.*” Feng’s uses of *hui* in this context would indicate that she now thinks of Yale as a home.

\(^{216}\) Ibid., 218.

parents feel attached to China as a place, not just as a historical and cultural legacy. For Zhang, sustaining a Chinese identity involves not just engaging in the everyday practice of being Chinese, but longing for China as a physical space.

In *Harvard Boy*, Tian Ye expresses a similar belief in the territorial basis of Chinese identity. When he first arrives at Harvard, he is worried about his language abilities. Although he had been studying English for a number of years, he recollects, “now that I myself had become a foreigner (*waiguoren*), I felt like the English accent I was hearing was vastly different from the one I had learned in school.”\(^{218}\) Here, Tian asserts that a simple change of location engenders a shift in identity, from *zhongguoren* to *waiguoren*. This implies that identity is contingent upon place, rather than practice. Later, he describes a series of satirical cartoons published in Harvard’s school newspaper. One characterizes the typical Asian American male student as, among other things, “selfish, incompetent and socially inept.”\(^{219}\) Although Tian dismisses the cartoon as overly one-sided, it leads him to consider the issue of socialization. Asian American students may have poor social skills, he argues, but they “are already many times more developed than those of students who came to Harvard after finishing graduate, undergraduate or even high school in China.”\(^{220}\) In his comparison, Tian treats Chinese American (*zhongguo meiguoren*) as a separate category of person from Chinese (*zhongguo ren*).\(^{221}\) In making this conceptual division, he implies that place, rather than ethnicity, is the main determinant of identity.

\(^{218}\) Tian, *Harvard Boy*, 27.
\(^{219}\) Ibid., 204
\(^{220}\) Ibid.
\(^{221}\) Tian wrote that the umbrella term “Asian American (*yayi*)” consists mainly of Chinese Americans (*zhongguo meiguoren*), Korean Americans and Japanese
In *Yale’s Spirit*, Feng Jianmei further asserts the place-based nature of Chinese identity. Firstly, she decorates her dorm room with a map of the world with China at its center, symbolically affirming her attachment to China as a physical location. Also, in a chapter on exams at Yale Law School, she reflects on why mainland Chinese exchange students\(^ {222}\) tend to receive good grades at American colleges and universities, even though English is not their first language. The two main reasons, she suggests, are: “one, Chinese students develop diligent, hardworking study habits from a young age, and two, the Chinese education system makes students get into the habit of valuing grades from a very young age.”\(^ {223}\) Like Tian, Feng implies that all Chinese students are diligent and hardworking. However, in her analysis, these qualities are not essentialized, but result from growing up in a particular place with a particular educational system. In the closing lines of the book, Feng emphasizes the link between identity and place one last time. On a bus bound for Kennedy airport in New York, the driver asks her where she is from\(^ {224}\):

“China!” I answered proudly. He said: “You *zhongguoren* are everywhere, all good people, even if you’re busy you’re still willing to have a friendly chat with us.”

It’s true! China is my home. How long have I been away from home? One year. Not long.\(^ {225}\)

Presumably, the conversation took place in English, which means that the driver would have said “you Chinese people.” Feng’s decision to translate “Chinese people” as Americans. “Most of them,” he claimed, “were not born in America, but have lived there for many years.” (Tian, 203). Thus, the fundamental difference between a ‘Chinese American’ and a ‘Chinese person’ is where he/she grew up.

\(^{222}\) Here, Feng’s uses the descriptor *dalu qu meiguoluxue de liuxuesheng*, explicitly limited the scope of her discussion to exchange students from the PRC

\(^{223}\) Feng, *Yale’s Spirit*, 190.

\(^{224}\) Feng translates his question as *ni jia zai nali*, literally “where is your home?”

\(^{225}\) Ibid., 213.
zhongguoren, instead of huaren, emphasizes the spatial dimension of Chinese identity. The Chinese, she implies, are the people for whom China is home.

**There is Only One Chinese Identity**

Overseas student memoirs not only reflect the prevailing discourse on Chinese identity, but also constitute it. In this section, I will address the impact of these memoirs on contemporary notions of Chinese identity. Specifically, I will argue that overseas student memoirs help foster transnational consciousness in readers, equate modernity with transnational practice, posit a pan-Chinese identity that transcends local experience, and naturalize political and economic allegiance to the PRC.

Overseas student memoirs foster transnational consciousness by presenting readers with examples of Chinese subjects whose lives are not constricted by the territorial boundaries of the PRC. In 1996’s *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai observed that “more people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born.” Before they can actually go to America, overseas students like Liu Yiting, Tian Ye and Feng Jianmei first have to imagine the possibility of study abroad. In most cases, the inspiration comes from a personal acquaintance. Tian, for instance, had an older classmate who was accepted by Harvard. In *Harvard Boy*, he writes: “it made me see clearly that through one’s own hard work, it was possible to obtain this kind of life-changing opportunity… what other people have done, there’s no reason I can’t do.” However, not all people have first-hand access to such role models. For them, study abroad memoirs can serve an analogous function, providing examples of

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successful transnational Chinese subjects. With these examples in mind, readers can more easily imagine a life for themselves outside of China, an instance of what Appadurai terms “media provid[ing] the resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project.”

As constructed in exchange student memoirs, leaving China is not imaginable, but attainable. In *Harvard Boy*, Tian claims that, because there are thousands of colleges and universities in the US, many of which offer scholarships or have low tuition fees, attending graduate school in America is not that difficult: “as long as you’re willing to endure a bit of hardship, work outside of class, or count on some financial support from your family, you can study abroad.” In *Harvard Girl*, Liu Weihua and Zhang Xinwu extend this formulation to include name brand American schools, arguing that, with the proper training, any Chinese child can get into the ivy league. By demythologizing study abroad, these authors chip away at the *nei/wai* binary, suggesting a more fluid model of Chinese identity. Chineseness, they imply, entails connection with the world outside China.

Overseas student memoirs also posit transnational practice as an essential component of Chinese modernity. As Ong and Nonini argue, overseas Chinese have typically played a central role in Chinese “imaginings of what is modern,” a dynamic that continues to play out in overseas student memoirs. In *Harvard Girl*, for

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228 Both *Yale's Spirit* and *Harvard Boy* contain numerous photographs of their authors taken in and around the Yale and Harvard campuses. These images of Chinese people in non-Chinese spaces make the transnational nature of Chineseness seem doubly tangible.
231 Ong and Nonini, “Chinese Transnationalism,” 16.
example, Zhang Xinwu praises Qin’s parents for ensuring that their daughter remained fluent in Chinese language and culture. “In reality,” he claims, “children who are comfortable with two languages and cultures have much more room for development than those ethnically Chinese children (huaren zidi) who are “more American than Americans.” Throughout the book, Zhang uses the phrase “room for development” as a euphemism for capitalist success, the ultimate marker of modernity in contemporary China. By remarking on Qin’s “room for development,” he suggests that transnational Chinese are necessarily modern Chinese. They can facilitate international trade and attract foreign investment, benefiting not just themselves, but the entire country. Feng Jianmei is another person for whom transnational practice breeds modernity. At Yale, she shared an apartment with roommates from Ireland and Spain, and studied with classmates from Israel, Argentina and a variety of other countries. Thus, in addition to learning about the American legal system, she also learned how to thrive in a heterogeneous, multi-cultural social environment. This helped her ultimately secure a job working for G.E. in Hong Kong, the city at the very top of the Chinese hierarchy of space. In this way, Harvard Girl and Yale’s Spirit lend support to a model of Chinese identity in which, to borrow a phrase from Appadurai, the global is modern and the modern is global.

While extolling the virtues of transnational practice, overseas student memoirs also strengthen the position of the Chinese state. In Modernity at Large, Appadurai, drawing on the groundbreaking work of Benedict Anderson, suggests that large, multi-ethnic countries like China are products of collective imagination. For such countries

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233 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 10.
to remain viable, their citizens must perceive themselves as members of an imagined community. At a local level, communal sentiment arises from shared experience. However, the lives of individual citizens within a given country vary greatly from person to person and place to place. In hopes of subverting subjects’ loyalties to more intimate collectives, governments employ a variety of discursive measures aimed at fostering a sense of national interest and solidarity.\footnote{Ibid.} As Appadurai argued, national subjects “share the collective experience, not of face-to-face contact or common subordination to a royal person, but of reading books, pamphlets, newspapers, maps and other modern texts together.”\footnote{Ibid., 161.} As publicly consumed texts, overseas student memoirs necessarily contribute to the production of Chinese national identity.

Overseas student authors facilitate the state’s nationalizing goals by positing the existence of a pan-Chinese identity. One way they achieve this effect is by repeatedly comparing Chinese people with Americans. Liu, for instance, contrasts the suzhi of Chinese and American students, arguing that, while Chinese students are better at enduring physical and mental hardship, American students are physically stronger, more independent and more pro-active.\footnote{Liu and Zhang, \textit{Harvard Girl}, 350-355.} Tian, meanwhile, argues that Americans are better than Chinese people at thinking outside the box, using the example of bicycle thieves to illustrate. In China, he claims, if a bicycle is locked up, the thieves simply ignore it. In America, on the other hand, they take whatever they can get, even if it is only a seat or a wheel.\footnote{Tian, \textit{Harvard Boy}, 229.} By making such comparisons, Liu and Tian construct “Chinese” and “American” as stable, uniform categories, erasing all
intra-group variation. Another way overseas student authors achieve this effect is by investigating American perceptions of China. Feng, for instance, interviewed several Yale administrators in preparation for her book, asking each a variation of the same question: “what do you think of the Chinese students at Yale?” The question is predicated on the assumption that Chinese students constitute a cohesive demographic group, regardless of widespread differences in racial, economic and linguistic background. If, as overseas student authors imply, Chinese people are all the same, it follows that they share common interests. And in order to protect those interests, they would naturally band together to form a unified social and political entity. This constructs the PRC nation-state as a fact, rather than an abstraction.

In this and other ways, overseas student memoirs complicate theories of Chinese identity that seek to de-privilege the role of the nation-state. Like Ong and Nonini, Appadurai argued that globalization weakens the appeal of the nation-state as a unit of social and political organization. He predicted that the twin processes of migration and mass mediation, the interchange of people and images, would speed the emergence of a post-national world. That is, because “neither images nor viewers fit into circuits or audiences that are bound within local, national or regional spaces,” nation-states would no longer be capable of monopolizing their subjects’ primary loyalties. While allowing for the survival of patriotic sentiment, Appadurai suggested that “it may be time to rethink monopatriotism, patriotism directed

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238 Appadurai uses “mediation” as a verb meaning “to become saturated with media,” not in the standard sense of “mediating a conflict.”

239 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 4.

240 Ibid, 169.

241 Appadurai defines patriotism as a sentiment that drives people to sacrifice or kill for their country.
exclusively toward the hyphen between nation and state." In its place, he imagined the rise of "patriotism totally divorced from party, government or state." Since the publication of Modernity at Large, Appadurai's claims have been somewhat substantiated. The intervening years have seen the emergence of a variety of transnational movements, religious, ideological and otherwise, that increasingly contest the nation-state for political, economic and emotional allegiance. However, in overseas student memoirs, the nation-state remains the primary object of patriotic sentiment. While visiting the US, for example Liu Yiting appears as a guest on a C-SPAN call-in program. At the end of the show, the host asks her whether she planned to go to college in America. Liu replies no, saying: "I believe that a person should first study her own country's (guojia) culture, and then go study other countries' cultures." By using the term guojia, Liu conflates cultural China with modern, statist China, implying that "Chinese culture" is something that belongs to the PRC. Likewise, when asked to participate in a panel discussion on human rights in China, Tian refuses, insisting that his China Current Student Association was a purely cultural organization. However, when Prime Minister Zhu Rongji visits Boston to give a speech at MIT, the club helps organize a poster-making campaign to welcome him. This casts the Communist Party regime as a dimension of Chinese culture. For both Liu and Tian, the Chinese nation is still bound to a particular state.

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242 Ibid., 176.
243 Ibid.
244 Liu and Zhang, Harvard Girl, 335.
245 Tian, Harvard Boy, 78.
246 Here, I use the term "nation" in the Andersonian sense, meaning a trans-historical imagined community.
Liu, Feng and Tian further bolster the position of the ruling regime by adopting a pan-Chinese identity. In his essay on contemporary Chinese immigrants in Hungary, Pal Nyiri notes that earlier generations of immigrants tended to maintain largely local identities, settling alongside people from the same province and forming business and community organizations based on native place. These immigrants, he argues, saw themselves as “Fujianese,” “Cantonese,” or some other form of provincial identity, not “Chinese.” In their memoirs, contemporary overseas student authors continue to maintain a degree of local identity. Feng Jianmei, for instance, is dismayed to find that most of her Yale classmates have never heard of her hometown, Nanjing. This inspires her to hang the map of the world on her wall, “so that my classmates would know precisely Nanjing’s position on the map.”

Liu Yiting also evinces a degree of attachment to her hometown, Chengdu. She is extremely pleased to learn that her strong performance in the interview with Larry Simms helped convince him that Chengdu was not a “remote and inaccessible backwater.” In general, however, overseas students authors adopt a pan-Chinese identity. When Liu Yiting travels to America, she brings several examples of Sichuan-style handicrafts as gifts. These gifts, she claims, will help her American host family and friends understand “the real China.” This assertion obliterates regional differences within China, implying that there is a singular, “real” China, of which every individual region is merely a constituent part. In this vision of China, all Chinese identities “are derived from a single national discourse.”

247 Feng, *Yale’s Spirit*, 61.
249 Nyiri, “Expatriating is Patriotic?” 650.
referring to themselves as “models” and “examples.” Liu, for instance, wakes up early the morning of her interview with Larry Simms, in order to squeeze in a few extra hours of preparation: “During the interview, I wanted to speak English as perfectly as possible, so as not to make Chinese students lose face.”

Here, Liu constructs herself as a Chinese student, rather than a student from Chengdu. In Yale’s Spirit, Feng also adopts a national identity. As a frequent international traveler, she writes, “time after time, I fill out customs forms for my compatriots (tongbao) who cannot speak English.”

Although the experience of speaking English, studying abroad and working for a multi-national company sets Feng apart from the other passengers on the plane, she still identifies with them as tongbao, fellow members of the same nation. This model of Chinese identity transcends local experience, wrapping as many people as possible within the symbolic fold of the PRC.

Overseas student memoirs not only support the notion of a universal Chinese identity, but also naturalize political and economic allegiance to the PRC as an aspect of that identity. At one point, hoping to “introduce modern China and the changes that have taken place in China post-'Open Up and Reform,'” Liu Yiting begins discussing Chinese economic policy with her host father. When he asks her how a high school student could know so much, she replies: “For one, I acquired some basic knowledge from school textbooks. But it also comes from personal interest. I always take special note of this kind of information.”

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250 Liu and Zhang, *Harvard Girl*, 326; emphasis is my own
251 Feng, *Yale’s Spirit*, 231.
252 *bao* connotes blood relation, suggesting an ethnic definition of Chinese identity
254 Ibid., 332.
person, she is naturally concerned with the affairs of the Chinese state. She then goes on to extend this claim to other Chinese students, telling her host father that “in China, there are many high school students like me, all of whom are very concerned with the future and fate of our motherland (zuguo).”\textsuperscript{255} Her host sister eventually internalizes and repeats this trope. After watching Liu on C-SPAN, she gushes: “You Chinese teenagers (zhongguo qingnian) are amazing! At the age when kids here only know how to eat chocolate ice cream, you guys are already thinking about your country’s problems.”\textsuperscript{256} The implication is that all Chinese teenagers are devoted to the PRC, not just the ones who appeared on the program. These statements are grounded in a national model of Chinese identity. That is, when Liu speaks of “Chinese students,” she is talking specifically about students from the PRC. To suggest that such students are devoted to their country is standard nationalist rhetoric. Interestingly, however, Liu also implies that all ethnically and culturally Chinese people are, in Nyiri’s words, “bound to China not only by ties of blood and culture but by sharing the modernizing goal of the state.”\textsuperscript{257} In a discussion on the need for education reform in China, Liu argues: “One of the prerequisites for the Chinese race’s (zhonghua minzu)\textsuperscript{258} realizing its dream of becoming a strong country (guojia) is full development of the talent pool.”\textsuperscript{259} Here, she conflates Chinese ethnicity with Chinese nationality, implying that all members of the zhonghua minzu, an ethnic category, are committed to the PRC state. Feng Jianmei makes a related claim in Yale’s Spirit, arguing that “it is useless

\textsuperscript{255} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{256} Ibid., 336.
\textsuperscript{257} Nyiri, “Expatriating is Patriotic?” 638.
\textsuperscript{258} This term is also sometimes translated as “nation.”
\textsuperscript{259} Liu and Zhang, Harvard Girl, 350.
for one person to grow rich and powerful; only when all of China grows strong can you truly hold your head up high." Once again, the implication is that the interests of all Chinese people, regardless of where they live or the degree of contact they maintain with China, are inherently linked to the PRC. In making such claims, Feng and Liu construct allegiance to the PRC as a Chinese cultural trait, equivalent to respecting one’s elders and working hard at school. Rather than negate the performative model of Chinese identity, they simply inscribe it with nationalist overtones. Under this model, Chinese identity derives not only from Chinese cultural tradition, but also the PRC state.

**Community, Identity, Capital**

There are a number of reasons why overseas students choose to pursue this particular vision of Chinese identity. In 2002’s *Leaving China*, Sun argued that online communities dedicated to overseas Chinese “highlight a contradiction between a tendency toward an increasingly displaced and fractured post-national identity and an essentialist discourse of national Self and Other.” As Chan explains, participants in these forums “pursue an essentialized notion of Chinese identity in cyberspace, as an attempt to reconcile themselves to their conditions of displacement and dispersal from the homeland.” Like the members of these virtual communities, overseas student authors experience “disorientation, alienation and loneliness.” In America, a variety of legal and discursive factors combine to define them as foreign Others, frustrating

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260 Feng, *Yale’s Spirit*, 232.
efforts to identify with the local population. In *Harvard Boy*, for instance, Tian Ye is highly conscious of his outsider status. His first week at Harvard, he tells his roommates he intends to *ruxiang suisu* (“when in Rome, do as the Romans do”). Not wanting to seem foreign, he makes a concerted effort to modify his behavior.

However, he still feels out of place in America:

> Because there were very few Chinese undergraduates at Harvard, and also because I was not active in the international student organization, I spent a fair amount of time with Americans. However, I noticed that, a lot of the time, even if I was swept into the middle of a lively crowd of people, in my heart, I still had the faint feeling I was a bystander (*pangguanzhe*) observing something mystifying.²⁶⁵

This sense of alienation inevitably leads overseas students like Tian to turn toward people of the “same kind” for emotional and material support. Adopting a pan-Chinese identity necessarily broadens the scope of “same kind,” enabling overseas students to feel a connection with people from all over China. This tactic is partly strategic and partly a product of circumstance. As a percentage of the total population, there are relatively few Chinese people in the US. Were overseas students like Tian to maintain a strictly local identity, there would be few people with whom they could truly identify. At the same time, when compared to the differences between a person from Beijing and a person from Boston, the differences between a person from Beijing and a person from Chengdu seem relatively slight. In this way, living amongst Americans tends to flatten the differences between Chinese people, making the notion of a pan-Chinese identity seem like fact. Like other immigrants, pursuing an

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 84.
essentialized, pan-Chinese identity allows overseas students to recover a sense of belonging.

However, this does not fully explain why overseas student authors construct allegiance to the PRC as a dimension of Chinese identity. Given the realities of globalization, they could easily rely on the ethnic and cultural models of Chineseness to achieve a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, their notion of Chinese identity remains tied to the PRC state. As Nyiri argues, overseas students’ willingness to maintain a Chinese national identity derives from a state discourse of “patriotism, success and modernity” that defines students and other overseas Chinese as a valuable resource for China’s economic development. In a 1995 opinion on “new migrants,” for instance, the State Council argued that overseas Chinese play an important role in “promoting our country’s modernizing construction, implementing the unification of the motherland, expanding our country’s influence and developing our country’s relations with the countries of residence.” This discourse implies that migration is within the bounds of acceptable behavior for Chinese citizens. It promises Chinese people living overseas that they will be recognized as patriots if they donate money to Chinese causes or attract foreign investment in China. In Harvard Girl, Liu Yiting constructs herself as one such patriotic overseas Chinese, successfully convincing her host father to invest in China. Official discourse also strongly implies that overseas Chinese stand to benefit economically by demonstrating their loyalty.

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266 Nyiri, “Expatriating is Patriotic?” 645.
267 Xin yimin. The official designation for people who have left the PRC since 1979.
269 Nyiri, “Expatriating is Patriotic?” 651.
contemporary overseas Chinese, China is not simply an object of sentimental
attachment, but also a potential marketplace. Tian Ye, for instance, decides to form a
startup company in China because he sees an untapped business opportunity. In order
to take advantage of such opportunities, overseas entrepreneurs must go through local
and state officials, the brokers of economic power. As Nyiri suggests, displays of
allegiance to the PRC state, both economic and symbolic, help curry favor with these
officials. For overseas students like Feng, Liu and Tian, writing memoirs that
naturalize the link between Chinese cultural identity and Chinese national identity is an
act of economic and political capital accumulation.

Conclusion

While study abroad provides overseas students with ample opportunities to
accumulate capital, the social and economic benefits of study abroad often cannot be
enjoyed without the blessing of the Chinese state. For Tian, for example, study abroad
fosters linguistic and professional skills that give him a competitive advantage in the
Chinese internet market. Because he does not have the same competitive advantage in
America, he directs his business efforts toward China. To succeed in China, he needs
to present himself as an acceptable, non-threatening Chinese subject. Otherwise, his
business activities would encounter bureaucratic difficulties.

In this chapter, I have examined how overseas student authors manipulate the
discourse on Chinese identity to construct themselves as loyal Chinese subjects.
Although overseas student authors have access to several competing models of

270 Ibid., 650.
Chinese identity, they tend to draw on the cultural model. This model is tied to practices like speaking a Chinese language and values like respect for education. As such, it encompasses ethnically and culturally Chinese people the world over, regardless of nationality. In addition to cultural practices, overseas student authors also link Chinese identity to the PRC state, as both place and political entity. Doing so subtly conflates the cultural and national models of Chinese identity, implying that readers who identify as ethnically Chinese also owe allegiance to the Chinese state. This effectively strengthens the Communist Party regime, extending its discursive reach beyond the territorial limits of China. In the same way that constructing study abroad as an instance of *suzhi jiaoyu* assures the state that overseas students do not pose a threat, promulgating a hybrid cultural-national model of Chinese identity affirms overseas students’ allegiance to the state. In return for these demonstrations of loyalty, overseas students gain a free hand to accumulate capital.
Conclusion: The Wang Qianyuan Incident Revisited

To a casual American observer, the Wang Qianyuan incident makes little sense. In America, popular discourse constructs study abroad as an internationalist project. Overseas students are supposed to use their cultural skills to promote dialogue and understanding. In video and print accounts of the Duke protest, Wang appears to do just that. Rather than praise her for being a model overseas student, however, Chinese netizens viciously attacked her.

Faced with this seemingly irrational behavior, there are two possible reactions. First, we could throw our hands up in frustration and cry “brainwashing.” While living in China, I encountered many people, both Chinese and foreign, who opt for this strategy. They argue that because Chinese people cannot think for themselves, they blindly follow everything the government tells them, refusing to consider opposing points of view. This reduces the Wang Qianyuan incident to a set of simple binaries – individual agency vs. mob mentality; heroic Wang vs. evil Chinese netizens; omnipotent Chinese government vs. feeble Chinese populace.

Alternatively, we could try to investigate the incident on its own terms. This strategy would proceed by acknowledging that Chinese people hold very different assumptions about the meaning and purpose of study abroad than Americans. By engaging with these differences, it would force us to concede that the attacks on Wang Qianyuan were conditioned by a complex discourse, rather than expressions of blind nationalism. As an exercise, it would point toward a more nuanced understanding of Chinese nationalism.
In this thesis, I have opted for the second strategy. I began by de-naturalizing the American view of study abroad, arguing that popular discourse constructs overseas students as cultural mediators. I then examined the popular discourse on study abroad in China, concentrating on three contemporary overseas student memoirs: *Harvard Girl*, *Harvard Boy* and *Yale’s Spirit*. I argued that these memoirs accommodate official discourse by constructing overseas students as commissioners dedicated to strengthening China. In the process of casting study abroad as a national project, they also posit loyalty to the PRC as a component of Chinese identity.

That official discourse in China would construct study abroad as a national project is not surprising. Whereas non-profit organizations like AFS and individual overseas students like Karen Connelly understand study abroad as a personal project with internationalist overtones, national governments naturally take a more self-interested view. On this point, the US government is no exception. According to a report published by the Lincoln Commission for Study Abroad,\(^ {271}\) for instance, “on the international stage, what nations don’t know can hurt them...greater engagement of American undergraduates with the world around them is vital to the nation’s well-being. It is in the national interest of the United States to send one million undergraduates abroad annually.”\(^ {272}\) This formulation stresses the value of study abroad for the nation as a whole, rather than individual students. It also stresses the benefits of study abroad to America, rather the international community. Government leaders in China approach study abroad from a similar perspective.

\(^{271}\) The commission receives most of its funding from the US State Department

\(^{272}\) Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, “Global Competence and National Needs,” v.
A more pregnant question is why Chinese overseas student authors have tended to embrace and reify the state’s view of study abroad. As indicated by the historical survey in chapter one, overseas students elect to study abroad for a variety of different reasons. Yung Wing, for instance, chose to go to America because his parents thought learning English would be economically and socially advantageous. Zhou Li, meanwhile, left China hoping to escape a rigid labor market. Contemporary overseas student authors continue to confess private motivations for pursuing study abroad. Feng Jianmei, for instance, wanted to improve her legal scholarship, while Liu Yiting sought “space for growth.” Study abroad has also consistently resulted in significant personal gains for individual overseas students. Yung Wing, for instance, used his knowledge of English to become a high ranking official with a comfortable salary. Liu Yiting and Feng Jianmei, meanwhile, capitalized on study abroad to secure corporate jobs in global financial centers. As these examples suggest, study abroad is far from a purely altruistic practice.

Since they first began writing about their experiences, however, overseas students have tended to emphasize the broad, public significance of study abroad. During the early twentieth century, Yung Wing and Hu Shi affirmed the official view of study abroad by adopting the role of national strengthener. While Wing tried to introduce American-style education, Hu focused on cultural reform. Contemporary overseas student authors pursue highly similar strategies. Like Wing, Liu Yiting suggests that education is the source of American power. If China wants to be as powerful as America, she argues, Chinese schools need to adopt American educational practices. Liu Weihua’s notion of suzhi jiaoyu, meanwhile, is predicated on the same
underlying assumption as Hu Shi’s “American Women.” Like Hu, proponents of *suzhi jiaoyu* argue that instituting a program of character reform will increase China’s national strength. While Hu advocated independence and self-reliance, contemporary students like Tian and Liu call for creativity and initiative. This strategy positions overseas students as architects of China’s national rejuvenation. To catch up with the developed world, overseas student authors assert, China simply needs to identify and implement the practices that make America, a symbol of global wealth and power, a strong country. Having lived in America, they argue, overseas students are the gatekeepers of this knowledge.

This construction of study abroad as a national project is the product of a conscious, calculated decision on the part of overseas students. As I argued above, study abroad provides overseas students with ample opportunities to engage in capital accumulation, economic, social and symbolic. While this process of *embourgeoisement* may be a good thing for individual students, it constitutes a threat to the Chinese state. As Nyiri points out, economically empowered diasporic communities have helped topple ruling regimes in countries like Mexico and the Philippines, not to mention the Qing Dynasty in 1911. With this lesson in mind, the Chinese government has attempted to co-opt the upwardly mobile aspirations of overseas students, constructing study abroad as a nationalist project. Overseas students comply with this discourse because it promises to brings further economic gains. For many, the socio-economic benefits of study abroad are linked to China. For instance, Zhou Li failed as a businesswoman in America, but became a best-selling author in China. Tian Ye, meanwhile, used the capital he accumulated at Harvard to start an
internet company in China. Since any venture involving China ultimately requires state approval, in order to reap the benefits of study abroad, overseas students must curry favor with the state. Thus, they need to counteract the perception that study abroad is a destabilizing practice.

In addition to suggesting that study abroad instills a desire and ability to strengthen China, overseas student authors also affirm their loyalty by selectively manipulating the discourse on Chinese identity. Their writings ground Chineseness in a set of essentialized cultural practices, a form of identity that encompasses ethnically and culturally Chinese people the world over. However, they also link Chinese identity to the PRC, a specific territorial and political entity. Doing so suggests that all people who identify as ethnically and culturally Chinese, regardless of location or national citizenship, automatically owe allegiance to the PRC. By constructing Chineseness as a bio-politicized national identity, overseas student authors bolster the position of the Communist Party. This affirmation of political loyalty promises to pay off with social and economic dividends. In this sense, overseas student authors are writing for an official audience.

Contemporary overseas students’ efforts to advance their individual interests by manipulating the discourse on Chinese identity is also a continuation of past practice. Early twentieth century overseas students like Hu Shi, for example, promulgated a vision of Chinese identity predicated on commitment to China’s well-being, rather than fixed Chinese cultural practices. For these students, who had no choice but to return to China after graduation, shifting the discourse on Chinese identity helped avert suspicions of de-nationalization. When study abroad resumed in
the late 1970’s, overseas students no longer had to return to China. Because they were only weakly connected to China both physically and economically, they no longer found it politically advantageous to affirm their Chinese identity. Since the early 1990’s, the rapid growth of the Chinese economy has once again made Chinese identity a valuable commodity. This motivates overseas student authors to posit a form of Chinese identity that is easily sustainable outside the borders of China.

Overseas students construct study abroad as a national project because it is in their interest to do so. In the process, they generate the public expectation that the goal of strengthening China subsumes all other goals. When their behavior fails to meet this expectation, they face censure. This, finally, helps explain the backlash against Wang Qianyuan. Critics saw Wang as a grandstander, putting her desire for media attention and political capital before the interests of China. Put simply, she did not live up to their expectations for how overseas students should behave. These expectations are not impositions of the state, but products of a complex discourse, one in which overseas students themselves play an integral role.

Like overseas student authors who construct study abroad as a national project, the Chinese netizens who attacked Wang Qianyuan were performing their allegiance to China. Though Chinese people frequently criticize the Communist Party for failing to reign in rampant corruption, neglecting rural development, and ignoring a host of important social issues, the fact remains that power still rests firmly within the hands of the party. Anyone wishing to succeed in China, economically or socially, must ultimately go through party channels. This is why every year, despite having little or no commitment to socialism, thousands of ambitious Chinese college students vie for a
limited number of spots in the party. Many do not join for ideological reasons, but because they think it is good for their future. The same principle applies to even the most baffling displays of Chinese nationalism. Chinese nationalists are not ignorant, susceptible to manipulation, or incapable of thinking for themselves, as some frustrated foreign observers would have it. They are simply trying to advance their own interests in the face of political reality.

That Chinese nationalism is more pragmatic than dogmatic is cause for both concern and optimism. In its present form, the Party government is little more than an economic steward. It inspires devotion by putting money in people’s pockets and food in their mouths. As long as Chinese people continue to perceive supporting the Party as in their best interest, the Wang Qianyuan’s of the world will continue to be shouted down. The flip side, of course, is that the Party’s lack of ideological support leaves it in a precarious position. If the economy stops growing, the Party loses its mandate to rule. If that happens, overseas students and other elites will no longer find it politically and economically expedient to align themselves with the ruling regime. Then, as has happened in the past, the Chinese people will begin to consider other options.
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