Negotiating identity by transnational Chinese students during COVID-19

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Abstract
For some years now, there has been an increase in the number of Chinese students travelling abroad to pursue higher education. The outbreak of COVID-19 has created new challenges for international students around the world. Based on an analysis of online forums during the pandemic (January–July 2020), we focus on the challenges Chinese transnational students have been facing. From the state’s point of view, being at the front of China’s internationalization progress, the students are expected to have both a ‘vision of globalization’ (国际化视野) as well as a deep ‘Chinese feeling’ (中国情怀). However, in practice during the pandemic, the students found it extremely difficult to achieve a balance between their multiple identities. In this article, we argue that discrepancies between the students’ identities may be due to the pandemic having highlighted several existing conflicts that have so far received only meagre attention or were even overlooked.

Keywords
Chinese international students, COVID-19, identity, education in China, nationalism

When Yang Shuping, a graduating senior from Maryland University, explained in her graduation speech that ‘the air was far cleaner in the United States than in China’, she probably never expected to be demonized by so many Chinese nationalists. In an effort to defuse the situation, Yang issued an online apology: ‘I’m sincerely sorry for the speech and hope to be forgiven by the public . . . The speech was just sharing a
part of my experience studying in the United States... There was no intention to belittle my country and my hometown. Yang Shuping’s speech demonstrates that transnational academic mobility challenges Chinese transnational students to negotiate between their national and global identities.

For some years, there has been an increase in Chinese students travelling abroad to pursue higher education. A recent report shows that in 2019, there were more than 700,000 Chinese transnational students. This increase is a direct result of the Chinese government’s internationalization strategy that was implemented a few decades ago. Despite a growing scholarly interest in education in China, the relatively new phenomenon of transnational academic migration of Chinese students has yet to be thoroughly explored. Studies have tended to focus on Chinese students’ motivations for pursuing higher education abroad. Their key motives for study abroad are to obtain a high-quality education and to improve language proficiency so as to boost their professional careers. A further reason for foreign study is the non-tangible benefits of broadening cross-cultural perspectives, such as being exposed to diverse social experiences and acquiring learning skills, which constitute added forms of social and cultural capital. Another major issue explored in studies on Chinese transnational education migration is the experiences of the students themselves. Much of the research has focused on students’ academic life, with particular attention devoted to their levels of class participation, learning styles, academic achievement in comparison with their peers, and social interaction. In general, many of these studies have highlighted the importance of integration in the host society, arguing that a high sense of engagement in one’s university and high levels of intercultural interaction will produce academic success. Although studies have shown that national identity deeply shapes students’ overseas experiences, relatively few empirical studies have examined the impact of study abroad on Chinese transnational students’ national identity. However, in light of China’s growing sense of nationalism in an era of increased globalization, understanding national identity formation and negotiation in the Chinese context is of particular importance.

The COVID-19 outbreak has created new challenges, highlighting the conflict between national and global identity amongst Chinese transnational students. Through an analysis of online forums during the COVID-19 outbreak (January–July 2020), we explored the various ways Chinese transnational students understood, negotiated, and renegotiated the state, social, and institutional paradigms that they faced. Specifically, we posed two questions: (1) how do Chinese transnational students negotiate their plural identities?; and (2) how has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Chinese transnational students’ identities? As we will demonstrate in this article, Chinese transnational students underwent a dynamic experience influenced by their cultural and nationalist consciousness.

**Nationalism and Chinese transnational students: The state’s perspectives**

Scholars generally recognize that a distinct sense of Chinese identity has existed for centuries. In contrast with modern national identity, which is often based on ethnicity,
nationality, or a presumed fixed territory, Chinese identity was mainly determined by Confucian culture and a sedentary ecological lifestyle. In the modern nation-state system, however, space and identity have become less fluid. Modernity is marked by the importance of borders and the defining and reconstruction of national history. Following this idea, scholars acknowledge that in the reform era, the Chinese Communist Party-state’s legitimacy rested on ‘statism’, which ‘recasts all those inside the collective national/spatial self as part of a single, unified yet multi-ethnic Chinese nation/race’. This emphasis on national unity has been increasingly promoted since Xi Jinping’s coming into power.

Alistair Johnston pointed out that Xi Jinping’s main ideological message has been the ‘great revival of the Chinese nation’. Xi first introduced the Chinese dream on 29 November 2013 in a speech at the National Museum in Tiananmen Square, where he stated that ‘realizing the renaissance of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history’. Furthermore, in several other speeches, Xi’s primary message was that the Chinese nation’s most deeply rooted and most influential spiritual quality was patriotism. On 30 December 2015, at the 29th study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, Xi Jinping emphasized that ‘patriotism must not remain a slogan but must closely link one’s own ideals with the future of the motherland and with the destiny of the nation, take root in the people, and contribute to the country’.

Xi Jinping also conveyed the importance of cultivating nationalistic sentiments to Chinese transnational students. In his speech in 2013, at the 100th-anniversary celebration of the European and American Chinese Students Association, he delivered the following message:

As a developing country, China needs overseas talent more than ever before . . . We believe that as long as the vast numbers of overseas Chinese students and scholars devote themselves to the prosperity and might of China and stand and fight together with our people, we will be able to write a glorious chapter in the achievement of the Chinese dream and the realization of the great revival of the Chinese nation.

In 2017, the internationalization of higher education was upgraded from a ‘national strategy’ to a ‘national action’. Within this framework, higher education has to serve the national strategy fully and actively take responsibility. Accordingly, preparing and sending Chinese students abroad for transnational education have played a crucial role in the internationalization of China’s higher education.

On the one hand, since the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese government’s attitude towards Chinese transnational students has been encouraging. For example, in 2010, the ‘Outline of national medium- and long-term planning on the reform and development of education (2010–2020)’ emphasized innovating and upgrading government-sponsored study-abroad procedures, as well as encouraging self-funded overseas study. It also stressed that the nation would adhere to the guidelines of ‘supporting study abroad, encouraging returning home, and granting the freedom to come and go’. On the other hand, difficulty in persuading excellent overseas Chinese students to return to China has become a major concern. In 2013, Xi Jinping coined the term – ‘playing a role in the nation’s construction’ – to encourage Chinese transnational students
to return to China.\textsuperscript{26} Between 1978 to 2010, the total number of Chinese students studying abroad was 1.905 million, of which merely 33.18 per cent (0.632 million) returned to China.\textsuperscript{27} According to the Ministry of Education, from 2010 to 2016, the total number of Chinese students studying abroad was 2.965 million, and the number of returning students totalled 2.153 million, reflecting a return rate of 72.62 per cent.\textsuperscript{28} This increase in the return rate shows that the state’s encouragement and related policies to attract returning Chinese students have delivered results.

**National identity and academic mobility: Students’ perspectives**

Stuart Hall characterized identity as ‘an idea which cannot be thought of in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all’.\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, scholars have recognized the importance of understanding identity formation and negotiation, and throughout the years, the term has come to encompass many different definitions.\textsuperscript{30} Within mobility studies, identity is considered key to understanding migrants’ experiences and changing subjectivities. For example, in their book *Mobile Lives*, Anthony Elliott and John Urry emphasize the significant influence of mobility on identity formation. They state that ‘the globalization of mobility extends into the core of the self’.\textsuperscript{31}

Recently a growing body of studies has begun paying attention to Chinese students’ identity formation and negotiation, with scholars focusing on various aspects of students’ identity such as gender, class, and national identity. For example, in a study concerning Chinese female students in Australia, Fran Martin sought to understand the complexities and contradictions characterizing the pursuit of higher education and cultural models of gender and family in contemporary China.\textsuperscript{32} In another study, Martin focused on the economic aspect of identity and described how, on the one hand, students’ employment in Chinese restaurants in Melbourne situated them at the margins of society. However, on the other hand, their engagement in parallel trading allowed them to build transnational networks. In this sense, instead of looking at either flow or restriction, Martin focused on situations where movement and confinement define each other.\textsuperscript{33}

National identity, defined as ‘the emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders’,\textsuperscript{34} has long been critical in mobility studies.\textsuperscript{35} Regarding transnational education migration, Nadine Dolby described studying abroad as an experience which ‘provides not only the possibility of encountering the world but of encountering oneself – particularly one’s national identity – in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formation of that self’.\textsuperscript{36} In a study of Chinese undergraduates in the United States, Kai Zhao focused on the various meanings Chinese students ascribe to national identity and how these understandings of national identity have been deeply shaped by China’s rapid economic and social transformations in the past decades.\textsuperscript{37} Zhao identified three categories: (1) rediscovering China, a category comprising students who changed their view of China and highlighted advantages of China they had never previously noticed; (2) acting as ambassadors, a category of students who felt a responsibility to defend China; and (3) encountering another Chinese self, a category of students who started questioning many taken-for-granted assumptions which they had before they left China.\textsuperscript{38}
A major element that characterized the studies just described is that the students’ identity was influenced by the Chinese context and by their host societies. This is linked to the definition of national identity discussed earlier, which emphasizes two important elements: ‘solidarity or oneness with fellow members and feeling distinct from or even antipathy to specified outsiders’.39

The transnational turn within mobility studies sheds further light on understanding how Chinese transnational students negotiate their national identities. Transnationalism is defined as ‘the processes by which migrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement’.40 In other words, the spotlight is placed on the students’ feelings of belonging to two or more locales. Kim argued that using the term ‘transnational academic mobility’ highlights the idea of ‘academics moving “between” or “above” territorial boundaries’. According to Kim, this term emphasizes ‘individuals and movements which are occurring in “transnational space” and not necessarily as part of official interaction between nations’.41 These theoretical ideas lead us to prefer the term ‘transnational Chinese students’ rather than ‘international students’, with the latter term being common in previous studies. As our empirical data indicate, the feeling of belonging to two locales and the need to negotiate multiple identities demonstrate that the students move between or above territorial boundaries.42

Methodology
The declaration of a national state of emergency in China resulting from the spread of COVID-19 generated a considerable impact on people’s lives. During the quarantine, people devoted time and effort to search online for updated information about the pandemic, and SinaWeibo – China’s highly popular microblogging service – became the key platform for the consumption of official information and the expression of thoughts and opinions.43 According to SinaWeibo’s first-quarter data report, there were 550 million monthly active users in the first three months of 2020 alone, and that the yearly increase was 85 million. The report stated that an average of 241 million were daily active users, and that the annual increase in this category was 38 million.44 On SinaWeibo, topics concerning Chinese transnational students occupied top search topics, with hundreds of millions of followers and commentators on each topic. With such massive participation of active users, both Chinese transnational students and Chinese microbloggers in China formed an online group which became the base of this study’s digital ethnographic inquiry.

Digital ethnography is the study of people through observing or participating in a particular online group or community.45 While the limitations of digital ethnography have been addressed extensively,46 scholars acknowledge that the digital landscape has become increasingly ‘real’ because people often experience digital reality as part of their everyday lives.47 Following this idea, Joanna Cook et al. pointed out that ‘the ethnographer’s field is a set of points that may be imagined as a space – as a site’.48 Thus, in the qualitative study of social media, these points are often represented by hashtags and keywords and an ‘un-sited field’.49

Preliminary research on microblog users during the COVID-19 pandemic has indicated that postings were more frequent and more negative than during the pre-pandemic
period. Therefore, it was expected that the microblogs in our study would include strong sentiments. These trends notwithstanding, following the idea that investigating social media is not limited to the study of the medium and its users but also encompasses social and cultural phenomena that are no less ‘real’ than those observed offline, we argue that the discourses on microblogs during the pandemic both displayed and constructed social and cultural trends.

The data collection of microblogs focused on the period between 20 January 2020 and 30 July 2020, a period which was selected to match the timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in China from its initial outbreak to its transition to normalcy. The analysis of textual posts was based on a thematic analysis, in which patterns of meaning or themes across a qualitative dataset are examined, allowing researchers to identify and interpret collective or shared meanings and experiences.

Both authors conducted parallel data collection and analysis in five steps. In the first step, by using the SinaWeibo Trends (微博热搜, comparable to Twitter Trends which shows topics or events that are frequently searched and discussed), we searched for topics that contained the keyword ‘Chinese transnational students’ (留学生). This search yielded 103 topics, 94 of which were associated with COVID-19. Second, both authors reviewed the 94 titles and identified four trending topics that generated the most heated discussions: (1) ‘A Singaporean student was beaten up in a street in London’; (2) ‘Should Chinese transnational students return to China?’; (3) ‘A returned overseas Chinese student splashed boiling water on a community worker during her quarantine’; and (4) ‘Chinese transnational students said that no one is allowed to slander their motherland’.

In the second step of the analysis, using the SinaWeibo search application programme interface (API), we identified three trending topics related to the topic of our study but which did not contain the term ‘Chinese transnational students’: ‘Xu Kexin’; The “Five-One” policy on international passenger flights; and ‘Overseas Chinese search for supplies to support Wuhan’. In the third step of the analysis, we selected posts related to Chinese transnational students’ identities from the students’ perspectives and from China’s domestic public, which also generated a substantial amount of public attention and discussions. This process yielded 125 posts.

In the fourth step, each author read through the posts in chronological order, summarizing and codifying the main messages. In the fifth step, the authors met and discussed the codes they had generated. This led to the formulation of a series of coherent themes concerning Chinese transnational students’ identities during the different periods of the investigation.

Phase 1: A sense of belonging to their village

On 20 January 2020, Dr Zhong Nanshan, the head of a high-level expert group of China’s National Health Commission, announced on SinaWeibo that the coronavirus was spread by human-to-human transmission, an announcement which marked the outbreak of COVID-19 in China. The spread of the virus in China did not leave the Chinese transnational students indifferent. Indeed, the situation in China aroused patriotic feelings amongst many of the students. Many Chinese students collected medical supplies and
sent them back to China as a donation. At that point, SinaWeibo was used to reach out to more Chinese transnational students who wished to contribute. For example, in the following microblog, a Chinese transnational student in Japan made an appeal for ways and means to donate masks to the people in Wuhan:

I would like to ask Chinese students studying in Japan: Does anyone know a way to send some surgical masks to China? . . . (1) Would you like to do it together? (2) Is it true that it is not possible to mail from Japan to Wuhan directly? If so, where can we find someone in China to help us collect the parcels and then send them to the distribution points? (3) There are also problems with the money relating to the postal fees. How much would it cost? (4) Maybe we can look for someone who is returning to China to help us deliver the masks there?54

The drive to purchase medical supplies was not limited to individuals, and several Chinese student associations also took action. We retrieved the following SinaWeibo post by the Chinese Students and Scholars Association of Chiba University in Japan:

‘I hope people who are abroad like us can also contribute to our compatriots in China! Our association is calling for supplies and arranging donation delivery to the disaster-hit areas.’55

These posts demonstrate that Chinese transnational students’ initiatives united them with the people in China, and they formed a united front fighting the virus. Their actions were perceived as patriotic, and they received support and appreciation, setting off discussions on SinaWeibo. In one post, the writer expressed gratitude towards the Chinese students:

Recently, many companies and individuals worldwide have been helping Wuhan through donations, including many Chinese students studying overseas. They care about China’s current situation and try their best to purchase medical supplies. Whenever I see this kind of news, I cannot help crying. Great appreciation to those who are helping Wuhan.56

The next post further demonstrates the feelings Chinese transnational students’ actions elicited in China:

Although they are abroad, many Chinese overseas students, as well as those working overseas, have donated money and medical supplies. Nobody has ever asked themselves what they would get by doing this. They are just trying their best to help others and this country. . . . I just feel that our country is really the best country, for we have the best families and friends. Although people do not know each other, they still will give a hand.57

In a study of what national identity means to Chinese international students in the United States, Kai Zhao explained that Chinese students shared the belief that the motherland serves as their strongest backup while abroad.58 One of the examples Zhao notes is students’ sense of obligation to assume the role of ambassadors and to defend their country. In a study of patriotic education in China, Orna Naftali wrote that ‘although identities are necessarily fragmented and indeterminate’, ‘national(ist) projects of self-formation’ can ‘crystallise strongly at times, inciting military conflicts and inspiring individuals to sacrifice their lives in battle or at least to care about the welfare of fellow citizens whom they
We argue that the unique period of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted one more aspect of the students’ understanding of their national identity. It enhanced their patriotic feeling, not only desiring to be ambassadors but also wanting to contribute actively to their motherland. Without crossing the border back to China, the students went through a dynamic experience, influenced by their cultural and nationalist consciousness, strengthening their sense of national identity. Consequently, during the first months of the pandemic, although Chinese students remained in their host countries, their donations and the resulting appreciative comments from people in China and the state positioned them ‘as being part of the village’.

**Phase 2: Retreating from the world**

The spread of the virus outside China produced negative feelings in the host societies of Chinese transnational students, which placed the students in a new social position that impacted their understanding of their national and global identities. This new status derived from China being identified as the originator and spreader of COVID-19. On 1 February 2020, the cover of Der Spiegel, one of Germany’s top news magazines, published a photo of an Asian man, wearing a gas mask and a red protective suit, holding a red iPhone. The title on the cover page read ‘Coronavirus: Made in China: When globalization becomes a deadly threat’. The term ‘Chinese virus’ also appeared in important academic journals such as Nature and was mentioned in public speeches given by influential journalists and politicians. This stigmatization led to intensive discrimination and racism against Chinese people abroad.

As a result, Chinese transnational students began expressing their concerns regarding the increasing anti-Chinese sentiments they experienced. For example, a Chinese transnational student in Spain commented: ‘The anti-Chinese forces are becoming more and more aggressive. Cases of insulting and assaulting Chinese students have occurred many times.’ Another student studying in Italy further explained:

> Life for us Chinese students here is very difficult. If you wear a mask on the street, people will take your picture. You will be discriminated against and attacked verbally. Lately, I do not want to go to class; I just want to go back home, go back to my country.

Seeing the increasingly rampant discrimination and anti-China sentiments from the West, Chinese in China reacted strongly:

> How dare the European and American countries discriminate against overseas Chinese and overseas Chinese students? Don’t you advocate freedom and democracy every day, have you no shame? It is disgusting. It is just like when the plague happened in the Middle Ages when white people discriminated against lepers and Jews. The coronavirus does not represent China. Also, to those Chinese who got used to kneeling, please stand erect. China is very powerful now. European and American countries only bully the weak and fear the strong. Now, I will also discriminate against those European and American white people who humiliate our country and Asian Americans for no reason!
This post shows that while strongly expressing indignation at discrimination against Chinese people, the commenter also appealed to Chinese transnational students’ patriotism: Chinese students should ‘stand erect’ and protect the national dignity and not ‘kneel’ to the Westerners.

When the pandemic started, the privileged position of Chinese transnational students attracted negative comments from Chinese in China. A post commenting on the pandemic situation and criticizing discrimination against overseas Chinese concluded with the statement that ‘this discrimination is the price that overseas Chinese have to pay for their integration’. This statement attracted attention and provoked discontent amongst overseas Chinese and transnational Chinese students. Following this post, a Chinese transnational student commented:

> It turns out that what I am suffering now has become the price that some people think has to be paid, and my pain is just a kind of cost for others. I have always been speaking for the people in Wuhan. I do not know what Chinese overseas students did wrong. They were pushed out to face the guns with such a solemn and righteous tone.

As these posts demonstrate, Chinese transnational students, facing discrimination in their host societies, felt ‘less part of the world’. On the one hand, they were expected to defend their country and exhibit patriotic sentiments in the face of discrimination, while on the other hand the treatment they received from people in China presented a dilemma because it questioned their sense of belonging. The following section demonstrates that as the pandemic spread, the dilemma these students experienced contributed to an identity crisis.

### Phase 3: Identity crisis

At the end of February 2020, when China’s epidemic situation gradually came under control, the coronavirus began to spread overseas. Worrying that the situation could worsen, tens of thousands of transnational Chinese students decided to return to China. However, the students did not receive a warm welcome, and their return stimulated heated discussions on social media. When new cases of COVID-19 were diagnosed amongst returning students, many of the online discussions were related to the fear of a second wave of infection. However, as the following posts demonstrate, this fear was mixed with a sense of alienation, and the discrimination that many of the students experienced outside China was now turned against them at home. For example, one commenter wrote: ‘When the epidemic situation in China was at its worst, they ran away. Now that China’s epidemic situation is under control and spreading abroad, they want to come back? Can they be called human beings?’

When local reports revealed that some returning students did not comply with the epidemic prevention and control measures in China, hashtagged posts appeared, such as ‘Isolated students are pouring boiling water on community members’ and ‘You are not contributing to the motherland, but you run back as fast as you can from thousands of miles away to poison the country’. Comments such as these further sparked negative emotions:
Some people, so-called ‘Chinese’, finally returned to their motherland to seek refuge but did not comply with our regulations. Some overseas students refused to drink boiled water but insisted on drinking mineral water. Some unfortunate tourists who came back from Italy did not disclose their itinerary, which sabotaged China’s efforts to fight the epidemic. Also, foreign Chinese dared to complain that their isolation conditions were poor, expressing their dissatisfaction freely. You people are just foreigners with a ‘Chinese face,’ so shameless you are! When building the motherland, you were not here; when delivering the virus from thousands of miles away to poison China, you acted the fastest of all.

The virtual battles further intensified when the official account of the Civil Aviation Administration of China posted the announcement of the ‘Five One’ policy on 26 March 2020. This policy refers to the ‘one airline, one country, one route, one week, one international flight’ policy. In practice, the policy allowed each domestic airline to maintain only a single route to a single country, and the route shall not operate more than one flight per week; each foreign airline can maintain only one route to China, and the weekly operation frequency shall not exceed one flight. The policy’s implementation meant that it would be extremely difficult for Chinese students to return to China. The post below illustrates the transnational students’ reaction to the new policy:

It is so hard and miserable for us overseas students. I was one of the first to donate money to the Wuhan Charity Association on 24 January. I graduated, and the university is driving me out of the dorm. I do not have much food and have no mask. I am patriotic. I am also Chinese.

Amongst the difficulties that many transnational students encountered as a result of the policy’s implementation were complex feelings challenging their national identity:

With the advent of the disaster, countries worldwide welcomed their citizens to return home as soon as possible and took action to rescue their overseas citizens. However, China is the only country that went against this trend. Some lazy [government] departments formulated a stupid restriction policy in order to shirk their responsibility, thus blocking Chinese people stranded in epidemic areas from returning home; this is especially the case for those overseas students, putting them at risk and keeping them alone and away from home. . . . When the epidemic is over, citizens of all countries will say that they are proud of their country for helping them return home. Our children can only say that our country will not let us return out of their fear that we will infect them. Motherland! Mother! Open your eyes and listen to your children!

In her study of ethnic groups in Britain, Sandra Wallman argued that since borders are symbolic, they respond to fluctuations between internal and external systems. A border’s size, quality, and significance will undergo modifications, subject to changing conditions and over time. Wallman maintained that the social border has two kinds of meanings: a structural significance, which she termed the ‘interface’ between two social systems; and the boundary that marks the end of one social system and the beginning of another and can therefore distinguish members from non-members. Phase 3, which we term ‘identity crisis’, emphasizes the new position of the Chinese transnational students in relation to their motherland. Instead of welcoming the students back, their return was perceived as opportunistic. As the cited comments demonstrate, the returning students were accused of
transporting the virus back to China, not respecting the local guidelines, and in general, they were treated as ‘foreigners’. The Five One policy further contributed to this division between those in China and those outside China who sought to return. Negative comments by local Chinese citizens had a significant impact on the returning students, because the comments put the students in a new position in (what used to be) their society. The negative comments and the Five One policy drew a clear distinction between the Chinese people in China (us) and the transnational Chinese students (them).

This distinction appears even more significant when we consider Zygmunt Bauman’s arguments about the close connection between who we say we are and which others we identify as ‘not us’. In his book, Thinking Sociologically, Bauman explains that ‘amongst all distinctions in people’s relations with others, the distinction between “us” and “them” stands out the most’. According to Bauman, these two categories signify completely different attitudes between ‘emotional attachment and antipathy, trust and suspicion, security and fear, cooperativeness and pugnacity’. While the Chinese Communist Party perceives nationalism as an emotional bond which unifies those who belong to the Chinese nation/race, in practice, our data indicate that during the pandemic, nationalism operated as an agile force which within a short period of time managed to exclude the Chinese transnational students from the ‘us’ category and to push them to the ‘they’ category. As a result, at this point, studying abroad did not accrue them any cultural or social capital; on the contrary, their overseas journey placed them at the margins of society. Thus, rather than the students’ identities remaining consistent with their cultural and nationalist consciences, students were compelled to undergo a dynamic process of continual formation and re-formation.

Conclusions: Phase 4: Returning home after the storm

In the spring of 2020, when many transnational students had already returned to China, they were left to contemplate their new social position. The following comment illustrates the coexistence of two dichotomous senses of belonging:

The Five One Policy will not affect my patriotism because I was born in China, grew up in China, received my education in China, and I am proud of the Chinese culture. This is my basic outlook. However, the Five One policy is indeed a very crude and a one-size-fits-all approach.

Some people ask why we only voice our opinions on Weibo instead of social media outside China. My God, why should I allow the hostile foreign forces to denigrate my country? In short, Five One [policy] will not make many students unpatriotic, but it will enable many students to see reality.

The four phases we identified reflect the complex story of China’s internationalization. From the state’s point of view, being at the front of China’s internationalization progress, the students are expected to have both a ‘vision of globalization’ (国际化视野) as well as a deep ‘Chinese feeling’ (中国情怀). In other words, they are expected to negotiate their multiple identities and achieve a balance between their international and national identities. However, in practice, during the pandemic, the students found it extremely
difficult to negotiate their identities. We suggest that discrepancies between their identities may be due to the pandemic having highlighted several existing conflicts that had so far received only meagre attention or were even overlooked.

The first conflict relates to Chinese transnational students’ national identity relative to their social position in the global context. During the uncertain and volatile period of the pandemic, national identities worldwide have intensified. Stimulated by allegations in the international media that China was the source of the pandemic, people’s national identity soon evolved into an anti-foreign sentiment towards China and Chinese students. The inclination to put the blame for the pandemic on China drove a wedge between Chinese transnational students and their host society, and as a result, it challenged the students’ ability to negotiate their national and international identities.

The second conflict lies in the various ways national identity is perceived and practised among Chinese transnational students and the people in China. Our findings indicate that once the pandemic was brought under control in China, nationalistic sentiments among people in China intensified and became more exclusive. Nationalistic feelings were linked to the fear of a second COVID-19 wave and the need to protect the country. This situated Chinese transnational students ‘outside the (Chinese) village’, because they were perceived as the potential source of ‘contagion’ and a conceivable threat to the nation’s health security. From the Chinese transnational students’ perspective, returning to the motherland was a way to escape the spread of the pandemic in their host societies. In other words, whereas the students perceived returning home as an expression of their nationalistic sentiments, their return was viewed by the Chinese people as conflicting with their interests.

The third conflict relates to how Chinese transnational students are perceived and labelled in Chinese society. China’s economic reforms have led to the production of increasing social stratification and as a result socio-economic inequality. According to Wenquan Feng and Yingyin Fan, these social strata are almost independent of each other, each characterized by their unique cultural capital. This distinction between the various social strata has led to inequity in the distribution of social resources and resulted in further social conflict. Research has shown that people belonging to China’s lower class are more likely to express their dissatisfaction with social inequity in Chinese society. Because Chinese transnational students belong to the more affluent strata, we argue that the negative sentiments were further intensified during the pandemic when resource allocation caught much public attention. As our findings indicate, the people in China viewed the return of Chinese transnational students to China as competing for much-needed resources. Thus, the students were criticized by the public, which exacerbated the conflict between the Chinese transnational students and the majority in China.

Last, we argue that another major reason for the Chinese transnational students’ difficulty in negotiating between their national and international identities is that during the pandemic, the discourse moved to the virtual space, a domain which offers new tools to perform identity. In a study concerning the influence of China’s patriotic education campaign on rural and urban youth conceptions, Naftali argued that whereas scholars tend to look at nationalism as a top–down phenomenon, China’s nationalist discourse has spread beyond official control since the opening up of popular media to market forces in
the early 1990s, which allowed individuals to ‘sidestep or modify dominant versions of nationalism and even convert public opinion into political action’. In his study on Han nationalists’ online activity, James Leibold indicated that the Internet and other technologies, such as smartphones and microblogs, provide more efficient and potentially effective community building, enabling spontaneous, bottom–up forms of nationalism. The online discussions we documented and analysed illustrate the idea that China’s nationalist discourse has spread beyond official domination. This was evident when some of the discussions were even viewed by the state as challenging China’s official nationalism discourse. In the People’s Daily, an article with the heading ‘It is wildly inappropriate to say that they run first to poison [the country]’ requested the masses to be more friendly to transnational students and concluded with the following appeal: ‘Towards the returning Chinese, there should be fewer extreme assaults and abuse, and more understanding and support . . . In a time of crisis, fellow Chinese should be more united and supportive of one another.’ The state took measures to blur the social and cultural boundaries that online users sought to draw, reflecting the seriousness with which it viewed online discourses. These online exchanges were perceived as challenging the national discourse, which aims to keep China unified, and which also strives to foster internationalization, a major part of China’s growing strength.

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**Notes**

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