

## “You Can Never Go Home Again” — A Study of Chinese Returnees’ Reentry Adaptation Process

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**Abstract:** With the number of students returning to China upon their accomplishing their studies abroad increasing year by year, the issue of reentry adaptation has arisen. In order to have a better understanding of the Chinese returnees’ readaptation process, the present study aims at studying their pace of readapting to their once familiar home environment, i.e., what factors contribute to their feeling of inadaptation, and whether the returnees have adopted certain strategies in readapting themselves. Major findings are that the returnees show various inadaptation symptoms, but less than half of them have proactively dealt with the inadaptation problem, and the rest have simply adopted the “let-it-be” attitude. Even the way the returnees deal with their reentry adaptation is culture-conditioned, that is, the Chinese culture influence is shown in the ways returnees cope with their readaptation.

### 1. Introduction

After about three and half decades of reform and opening up, the number of overseas returnees in China has increased exponentially. At the same time, according to an accredited official source<sup>1</sup>, the number of returnees by the end of 2013 was coming closer and closer to the number of students who choose to study abroad. Statistics from the Ministry of Education<sup>2</sup> show that in comparison with 2012, the number of overseas-bound students in 2013 increased by 3.58%; in contrast, the returnee number exceeded that of the previous year by 29.53%. The numbers of outbound and inbound students reached 459,800 and 364,800 in 2014.<sup>3</sup> As to the reasons why such large numbers of students who have studied abroad, especially in developed countries, opt for returning to their home country upon accomplishing their studies, the answers from the interviewees of the present research are very representative: They have returned from Western countries to China in pursuit of better employment and development opportunities. However, when some returnees are asked about whether they have expected any kind of difficulty in readjusting themselves to the Chinese home culture environment, nearly 90 percent of them answered “no,” because of the obvious assumption “Why does one need readjustment upon returning home?” (in the words of one of the returnees from Beijing) Nevertheless, when the returnees started to live and work in earnest in Mainland China, their native country, they have come to the sudden realization that they do need to readjust to their home environment. As a matter of fact, this experience proves relatively easy for some, but it is as difficult as, if not

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.chinanews.com/lxsh/2014/03-13/5944946.shtml>. Retrieved 13 March, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chinanews.com/lxsh/2014/03-13/5944946.shtml>. Retrieved 13 March, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jsj.edu.cn/news/1/572.shtml> Retrieved 23 February, 2016.

more difficult than, their adjustment process abroad for others.

This phenomenon is not unique to Chinese returnees. Researchers from various countries (see literature review below) have conducted research on reentry, or readjustment, as often referred to in the related literature. Comparatively speaking, studies on Chinese returnees are somewhat limited. That is why the present study endeavors to capture some of the complexity of the readjusting efforts of the Chinese returnees, e.g. the range and depth of their readjustment, and other related issues. On the one hand, the authors want to make the survey for comparison purposes, i.e. to compare the results from the present study with other similar international endeavors; an even more ambitious intention is to add a Chinese perspective to the international research literature on reentry studies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definitions of Reentry and Readaptation

In the cross-cultural communication literature, scholars often refer to sojourners' returning to their home country after having lived or worked abroad for an extended period of time as reentry (e.g. Adler, 1976), and their efforts to adapt to their taken-for-granted home environment as readjustment (Gama & Pedersen, 1977), readaptation (e.g. Adler, 1981), repatriation (Harvey, 1983), and re-acculturation (e.g. Stringham, 1993), etc. Actually, this phenomenon of not being able to come to terms with one's once-familiar home surroundings was noticed as early as in the 1940s by researchers like Schuetz (1945), but it began to receive formal scholarly attention in the 1960s (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), and has been studied with considerable weight ever since.

In the present research, reentry refers to cross-cultural reentry, that is, the transition in one's own culture after having studied or worked abroad (Adler, 1976); and readaptation means the endeavors the returnees make to come to terms with their once familiar home surroundings. Researchers from various countries have studied this "re-" phenomenon, which, in the present study, will be referred to as three "p's," namely, people, processes, and practices. According to Szkudlarek (2009), the three "p's" have influence on each other and therefore deny a clear-cut differentiation line. This mutual influence effect is seen in that scholars tend to approach reentry from at least one of these perspectives. Therefore, the related literature on reentry and readaptation will be reviewed below from the three "p's" perspectives for the sake of convenience.

### 2.2. People — Who Compose the Reentry Adaptation Population

In related research on an international level, two groups of the reentry adaptation population, or with another name, sojourners, have drawn the researchers' greatest attention (c.f. Inkson et al., 1997; Sussman, 2002; Cox, 2004).

One group is university-aged **students**, who, no matter whether having studied abroad for a long or short time, have been studied in considerable depth. For example, there have been studies by Butcher (2002, 2004), which have compared the reentry problems experienced by

graduates of New Zealand universities from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Butcher (2002, p. i) argues that “returnees’ sense of ‘home’ is disrupted and challenged and that a sense of homelessness is a defining feature of the re-entry experience.” Ikonen (2007) studied how Finnish students made adjustments to their home surroundings and struggled to make sense of the readjustment process, and pointed out that the students’ difficulties in readaptation were related to both nonverbal and verbal communication. Rujipak (2009) surveyed how Thai students who had studied in Australia managed their readjustment by conducting qualitative interviews, which explored the returnees’ transition experience in-depth. Groters (2013) investigated how to meet the predeparture and reentry needs of ONU (Olivet Nazarene University in Illinois, USA) Spanish study abroad students. She found that all the students who had gone to study in Spanish-speaking countries experienced some kind of dissonance upon reentering the United States to certain levels, and the interviews with these students had indicated that a reentry program would be beneficial to them; to name a few.

Another group of people who have been in the limelight of research are **expatriates**, whose readaptation endeavors have been found to be even more difficult than those of students. In comparison with the expatriate adaptation research, studies on their readaptation are fewer in number. A few examples are: Gregersen and Black (1996) studied theoretically and empirically how the Japanese expatriates returning home from their international assignments had exhibited single or dual commitments, and compared how Japanese expatriates differed from their U.S. counterparts; Newton et al. (2007) investigated factors that influence Australian organizations to utilize repatriation programs, and concluded that though the importance of repatriation had been realized, insufficient support had been provided by these organizations. Francees (2012) surveyed how the Dutch Antillean Sojourners adjusted their culture identity change, their reverse culture shock after return and what changes occurred in their proactivity on job performance.

The above two groups of returnees are of importance to our world, regardless of their origin, because we are in an epoch of globalization, and this world-wide migration is a trend that is too striking to be overlooked. Thus, studying these returnees’ difficulties and problems can be justified in all countries.

### **2.3. Process — How Quickly Returnees Adapt to Their Once Familiar Home Surroundings**

Research on the readaptation process boils down to one thing - the returnees vary in their readaptation degree and pace. The first case in point is the W-Curve theory by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963). The W-Curve Model, reminiscent of the U-Curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), describes a sojourner’s transition process in entering the host culture. As the W-shape is composed of double *u*’s, i.e., the first *u* represents the sojourners’ adjusting pattern in the host country, while the second *u* delineates their readaptation pattern in the home culture. This second half of the W-Curve pattern has made it explicit that the sojourners’ readaptation pattern is just like the pattern when they first entered their respective host cultures, and has captured the ups and downs of their readaptation efforts. Weaver (1987) addressed plainly “the process of reentry,” as the self-evident name demonstrates. Brabant et al. (1990) found that the readaptation process was more problematic for females than males. Christofi (2003) is another representative

figure in this category of studies. She noticed that the returnees had different coping styles in handling their living and working environment after their sojourning abroad. In her opinion, the returnees' duration of sojourn, readiness to return, etc. all contributed to their readaptation pace. She also studied why sojourners returned home and left for the host country again, and justified the study of returnees since previously returning home had been "underestimated and not typically seen as a difficult transition process"(p. vi). Above all, her study was a holistic picture of the difficulties and frustrations experienced by reentering sojourners. Martin and Harrel (2004) believed that intercultural reentry is a system more complex than it seems at first sight, so the researchers had every reason to develop a system of reentry, in which the various variables can be studied more scientifically. Bohn (2012) explored the various reentry problems and gave some guidance to returnees from Ecuador.

To sum up, studies of this category make it clear to us that the duration and degree of the readjustment phase vary from person to person, and the decisive factors for the pace of reentry are more complex than often perceived. In some cases, guidance is even needed for readaptation.

#### **2.4. Practices — How Returnees Feel and Behave**

As has been believed by scholars, returnees' readaptation endeavors tend to be associated with certain feelings and be marked by certain behaviors. The following studies seem to prove this point: There are scholars who describe the painful experience of sojourners as "reentry shock" (e.g. Seiter, 1989; Isa, 1999, among others); Loh (2003, p. 13) noticed the very first reactions of the returnees upon their return and pointed out that "return culture shock can be pernicious because it can awaken in returnees a sense of non-belonging." Other studies that observed how returnees felt and behaved upon return are: Gu (2009) studied how Chinese *Haigui* [returnees from overseas] are affected by the social and political factors of their home country. Gu (2009, p. 4) found that "re-entry shock is shown as a strong negative social factor influencing *Haigui* since most *Haigui* experienced re-entry culture shock after returning to China and it took them more than one year to readjust to their home culture again." Pritchard (2011) even referred to the re-integration experience of Taiwanese and Sri Lankan graduates into their native cultures as "re-entry trauma" for understandable reasons; Roberts (2012) discussed the various changes that U.S. students had gone through while going abroad to study, and how these changes did not stop when the students returned to their native country, and also what student affairs professionals can do to help students get through the process of change and acclimation back in the university. The feelings and behavior of repatriates are not only studied by researchers, but also by the returnees themselves, for example by students. Kaufman (2013) is a representative of such studies. She wrote her graduation report with the title "Re-Entry Programming," in which she described the purpose, practices and recommendations for supporting WPI (Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, USA) students following travel abroad.

These studies, taken together, point to the phenomenon that the returnee population has changed in one way or another as a result of their overseas experiences, but their home environments remain more or less the same, or at least the latter have not changed as radically as the former. Thus, the returnees tend to find themselves awkward in, or unacclimated to, their

once familiar home surroundings, at least for a certain period of time. To explain this phenomenon, researchers trace the returnees' inadaptation back to the latter's social as well as personal factors. More often than not, the conclusions are that those factors play a joint role in deciding how soon the returnees can gain back their sense of belonging and being "accepted" again.

From the above review of the related literature on the "re-" phenomenon, it is easily seen that in terms of **people** who have been studied, the two groups are distinct, i.e., either college-age students or expatriates. However, the present research aims to study a particular group of Chinese who have been students abroad, but have returned to China (their native country) for employment. This group is unique in that it has both the character traits of students and the features of the working staff. In view of the **process** and **practices** in readapting, studying their re-acculturation behavior and process can facilitate understanding of the "re-" phenomenon in the Chinese context and thus be helpful in enriching the readaptation literature on a world scale.

### **3. Method of the Study**

#### **3.1. Research Questions**

In order to compare and contrast this large number of Chinese returnees' reentry adaptation process with those studies in other countries, the present research will explore the Chinese returnees' readaptation degree and pace and their related issues. More specifically, the present study intends to explore the returnees' pre-entry standing and post-return status quo for the purpose of giving a panoramic view of the returnees' readaptation process and to find answers for their inadaptation, and more importantly, to learn more about their psychological journey in this process with the following research questions:

- 1) What are the demographic characteristics of the returnees? What kind of expectations did they have for their post-return living and working conditions?
- 2) Have the returnees experienced any difficulties in readaptation since their return? If yes, to what aspects do they find most difficult to readjust? How long did it take them to readapt themselves to their once familiar home environment?
- 3) If the returnees report issues in readaptation, what are the most frequently mentioned causes for their inadaptation?
- 4) How do returnees rate their overseas experience in relation to their present situation?
- 5) What strategies have the returnees adopted in the readaptation process?

#### **3.2. Data-collection and Data Processing**

The data for the present study was collected in 2013 by 75 part-time students studying for their master's degree in applied linguistics at the University of International Business and Economics. Each student was responsible for distributing four questionnaires (see appendix) to their acquaintances and/or friends, who had had overseas experience. The requirement was that ideally two of the questionnaires should be distributed to returnees from English-speaking

countries, and the other two, to sojourners from non-English-speaking countries; besides, the questionnaire informants were requested to give their honest answers. The questionnaire distributors could ask the informants further questions concerning the latter's answers on the filled-out questionnaires. Altogether 300 copies of questionnaires were distributed, but only 217 were returned. Even of the 217 copies, there were incomplete ones. After the questionnaires were turned in, the authors sorted them out by the informants' host countries and calculated the results by SPSS 17.0.

The questionnaire consists of five parts: Part I comprises questions on the returnees' overseas experience; Part II includes questions on their present situations; Part III is a comparison between their present situations and their sojourns abroad; Part IV consists of the returnees' evaluation of their readaptation process in relation to their past overseas experience; and Part V asks about their readaptation strategies and their own reflections on their readaptation processes.

One thing that needs to be pointed out is that the incomplete answers mainly lie in Parts IV and V, which explains why the following reports on results are not in full conformity with the order of questions in the questionnaire.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Subjects' Purpose for Going Abroad**

In order to explore the returnees' reasons for returning home, the present research first inquired about why they went abroad in the first place. Of the 217 returnees surveyed, 208 have provided information about their purpose for going abroad. The three most frequent answers are: 88 (40.6%) went abroad for achieving a higher degree; 83 (38.2%), for obtaining the experience of being in a foreign culture; while 57 (26.3%) had the intention of finding a better job upon their return from overseas. There is overlapping in their answers, e.g., some informants indicate that their purpose of going abroad is for both a higher degree and the experience per se.

### **4.2. Host Countries of the Returnees**

Of the 217 subjects, 202 have given the information about their host countries, the top seven of which are Britain (61 persons, accounting for 28.1% of the total), the U.S. (43, 19.8%), Australia (33, 15.2%), Canada (17, 7.8%), France (15, 6.9%) and Germany (7, 3.2%). The rest of the list of host countries are New Zealand, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Japan, South Korea, Sweden, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Turkmenistan, Denmark, Singapore and Ukraine. The numbers of returnees from these countries are not significant enough for reporting the exact percentage.

### **4.3. Gender and Age of the Returnees**

Of the 213 informants who have given their gender information, 96 are males, and 117 are females. Of the 217 subjects for the present research only 139 have specified their age. Among them, the youngest is 17, and the oldest is 46, with 91.4 percent are between 21 and 35.

#### **4.4. Information on the Returnee's Educational Background**

Of the 212 informants who have indicated their educational level, 13 (6.1%) have received their undergraduate education abroad, 149 (70.3%) have received their master's degrees in their various host countries, and 49 (23.1%) have been awarded doctoral degrees by various universities overseas. One informant did not receive any degree overseas.

This result suggests that the majority of the subjects for the present research have gone abroad to pursue an advanced degree, and master's degree seems to be the norm.

#### **4.5. Sojourn Lengths and Conditions in Host Countries**

Of the 199 informants who have given information on their lengths of sojourn overseas, the shortest time given is 10 months, and the longest is 120 months. The most typical time lengths in months are 24 (35 informants), 36 (27 informants), 48 (11 informants), 60 (14 informants), and 72 months (6 informants). The rest of the numbers vary between 10 and 120, and are not significant enough to be reported. During the time abroad, 143 (65.9%) of the 217 subjects have work experience abroad, at least briefly. 167 (77%) of the sojourners were in their respective host countries alone, that is, without the company of their family members.

#### **4.6. Sojourners' Main Reasons for Returning to China**

Of the 217 informants, 29 (13.4%) claim that they have returned to serve the country; 97 (44.7%) intended to pursue career development; 70 (32.2%) returned for family reasons; 15 (6.9%) were forced to leave their host countries because their visas would expire upon their graduation; 15 (also 6.9%) left their host countries because they could not acculturate themselves to the host cultures, while the remaining 23 (10.6%) returned to China for other reasons.

#### **4.7. Returnees' Job-hunting Time and Affiliation Types**

Of the 216 who gave information on their job-hunting experience, 67 (30.95%) had received an offer before they returned to China; 96 (44.25%) found themselves a job within less than 3 months of coming back; 30 (13.8%), in less than 6 months, and 11 (5.1%), less than a year, the accumulative percentage of which amounts to 94.4%.

Of the 214 informants who provided information for their present affiliation, the numbers are as follows: 69 of them, 31.8% of the total, are working in a company invested by a foreign country, followed in turn by 50 (23.0%) in a state-owned company; 36 (16.6%) in a privately-owned enterprise; 25 (12.0%) in a joint-venture company; 9 (4.1%) in a governmental institution, and only 7 (4.6%) have established their own companies. The remaining part is not significant enough to be reported.

This affiliation distribution pattern is closely related to another question, in which the returnees were asked to rate how favorable the current situation in China is for returnees to start their own businesses. To this question, 23 (10.6) of the 213 informants answered that it is "very good"; 154 (71.0%) replied that it is "good, but still needs improvement", while 36 (16.6%) are

of the opinion that it is not suitable at all.

#### 4.8. Pre-entry Expectations vs. Realities After Reentry

Of the 215 answers, 30 (13.8%) regard their present jobs as better than their expectations; 143 (65.9%) rate the jobs they have found as basically the same as their expectations, while 42 (19.4%) opine that they have found jobs worse than they expected.

To the question whether the returnees can use what they learned abroad in their current jobs, 49 (22.6%) answered that they can use their overseas learning ultimately; 116 (53.5%) can use what they learned abroad to some extent, while 38 (17.5%) believed that they can use only a little of their knowledge, and surprisingly, 13 (6.0%) have found no use for their learning at all.

The salary expectations of the returnees are as listed in the Table 1.

Table 1. Expected Monthly Salary of the Returnees

Monthly Salary in RMB		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	5000~10000	47	21.7	21.8	21.8
	<b>10000~15000</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>30.4</b>	<b>30.6</b>	52.3
	15000~ 20000	39	18.0	18.1	70.4
	<b>20000 or above</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>24.9</b>	<b>25.0</b>	95.4
	Other	10	4.6	4.6	100.0
	Total	216	99.5	100.0	
Missing System		1	.5		
Total		217	100.0		

The above table shows that returnees have high expectations for salary on the whole. When they are asked about whether their expectations have been met (to combine this result with Question 26 in the questionnaire), of the 210 answers given, 54 (24.9%) admitted that they now earn as much as they did abroad; 64 (29.5%) stated that they now earn less than they did abroad, and 92 (42.4%) claimed that they now earn much less than they did abroad.

Table 2. Expected Positions of the Returnees

Position Description		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Supporting Staff	21	9.7	9.8	9.8
	Sales Agent	33	15.2	15.4	25.2
	<b>Leader of a Group</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>27.2</b>	<b>27.6</b>	52.8
	<b>Department Manager</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>24.4</b>	<b>24.8</b>	77.6
	Company manager	33	15.2	15.4	93.0
	Others	15	6.9	7.0	100.0
	Total	214	98.6	100.0	
Missing System		3	1.4		
Total		217	100.0		

Table 2 shows that returnees have high expectations for their positions too. For Question 26 on the questionnaire (See Appendix) whether their expectations for their salaries and positions are met, of the total 215 subjects, 57 (26.3%) regard their expectations for monthly salary and position are both met; 116 (53.5%) think that their expectations for the two are only partially met, while 42 (19.4) feel that neither of their expectations has been met.

The next question asks about the returnees' expectations for living and working conditions. As to expectations for living and working conditions as a whole, the 217 informants have expressed their opinions as follows: 26 (12.0%) are satisfied with the current salary; 12 (5.5%) are contented with the welfare and insurance; but only 3 (1.4%) are satisfied with the educational infrastructure and the opportunities arisen for them in the process of readapting to home environment. 15 (6.9%) do not complain about their residential standard.

In striking contrast, 119 (54.8) expect good opportunities and potentials for career improvement; and 127 (58.5%) are optimistic about the market potentials; 85 (39.2%) find themselves comfortable in the current interpersonal relationships.

Returnees were asked to rate the following factors in their readaptation to home culture. The importance of the respective factors ranged from 1 (not important) to 5 very important. The results are as follows in Tables 3 - 4.

Table 3. Returnees' Ranking of Factors Influencing Their Readaptation

(1=Not Important; 5=Very Important)	
	<b>Mean Rank</b>
<b>Food Safety</b>	<b>4.55</b>
<b>Housing and Traffic</b>	<b>4.79</b>
Self-identity	3.89
Social Network	3.97
Working Style	3.65
Communication Style	3.46
Educational System	3.69

Table 4. Friedman Test of the Ranking of Factors Influencing Readaptation

<b>Test Statistics<sup>a</sup></b>	
N	213
Chi-Square	86.760
df	6
Asymp. Sig.	.000
a. Friedman Test	

These results show that although the returnees have varying opinions about these factors, their number 1 and number 2 worries, i.e. housing and traffic, as well as food safety have greatest impact on their readaptation process.

Expectation is one thing, but reality is another. Compared to developed countries, China is still faced with the most compelling and over-arching issues of our age, which have great impact on the returnees' readaptation process. These issues, more often than not, have formed the causes of the returnees' inadaptation, at least for a certain period of time. In several cases, the informants have confessed that the more they found these issues unbearable, the more they missed their host countries. The obvious reasoning for this phenomenon is that the returnees' overseas experience has a profound impact on their reentry adaptation. It is thus necessary to explore how the reentrants assess their overseas experience.

#### **4.9. Evaluation of Overseas Experience**

Of the 215 informants, 143 (65.9%) value their overseas experience, and believe that without it, they would not have got to where they are today; 68 (31.35) regard it as nothing significant, and look on it as just a life experience; 4 (1.8%) even regretted being abroad because of the opportunity cost at home.

Returnees look on their overseas experience as beneficial to them in the following aspects, shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Reentrants' Evaluation of Their Benefited Aspects Abroad

<b>(Multiple Choices are Possible)</b>	<b>Frequency (out of 217)</b>	<b>Percentages (do not add up to 100% because of multiple answers from different returnees)</b>
<b>Language Skills</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>79.3%</b>
Expertise	72	33.2%
<b>Overseas Degrees</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>50.2%</b>
Administrative Skills	36	16.6%
<b>Understanding of the Different Cultural Norms</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>64.1%</b>
Communication Style and Skills	110	50.7%

In terms of comparison with their colleagues without overseas experience, 213 have provided opinions on this issue. Of them 97 (44.7%) believe that they have a wider vision, but they are not yet very familiar with the domestic issues as their colleagues are; 70 (32.3%) have sensed no difference in terms of vision, but regard themselves as more qualified for their jobs than their colleagues are; 25 (11.5%) have the feeling that their colleagues regard the returnees as less flexible than their domestically educated colleagues, and the returnees do believe that they should learn from these colleagues; and 21 (9.7%) have other opinions that were not specified.

When asked to rate the differences the returnees found between themselves and their colleagues without overseas experiences, the scaling was as follows (1 meaning almost the same, and 5 meaning extremely different), as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Returnees' Ranking of Aspects of Difference in Comparison with Those of Their Colleagues as a Result of Their Overseas Experience

(1=Not Important; 5=Very Important)	
	<b>Mean Rank</b>
Communication Style	2.33
Attitude to Leaders	2.65
Working Process	2.43
Performance in Public	2.59

Table 7. Friedman Test of the Ranking of Aspects of Difference with Colleagues

N	214
Chi-Square	12.623
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.006
a. Friedman Test	

The above results show that although the returnees believe in general that their overseas experience has contributed indispensably to their growth, they do not think it has made them fundamentally different from their colleagues without such experience. Differences do exist, but they are not significant.

#### 4.10. Readaptation Endeavors and Strategies

This survey shows that the returnees generally seek soonest adaptation (see Table 8 below) and take active measures to speed up their readaptation process.

Table 8. Returnees' Claimed Readaptation Time after Reentry

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<b>About 3 Months</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>53.5</b>	<b>54.5</b>	54.5
	About 6 Months	33	15.2	15.5	70.0
	About a Year	20	9.2	9.4	79.3
	The Same Length of Time as Abroad	9	4.1	4.2	83.6
	Other	35	16.1	16.4	100.0
	Total	213	98.2	100.0	
Missing System		4	1.8		
Total		217	100.0		

But returnees' readaptation endeavors are not easy. In the strategies that sojourners adopted, features particular to Chinese culture are evident: 1) Seeking endorsement among other sojourners, i.e. the unadapted returnees would talk to other sojourners who have the same experience, the reasons behind this behavior is evoking common feelings within the sojourners' group and reducing the "danger" of being seen as "showoffs" by people without overseas experience. One sojourner's citation of an old Chinese saying is a good explanation of the sojourners' behavior: "Your heart follows the Saint, but your mouth conforms to the public," that is, one would strive to show conformity with the great majority, and would not give others the impression of being oddly unique in kind or degree. To sum up, the reentrants tend to keep a low profile in their readaptation process.

There are returnees who expressed that they cannot readapt themselves completely. In cases of not being able to readapt themselves, these returnees would have second thoughts about whether to stay in China, their native country, or not.

Table 9. Returnees' Possible Choices in Case of Inadaptation (Whether or not to go abroad again)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	38	17.5	17.7	17.7
	<b>No</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>38.2</b>	<b>38.6</b>	56.3
	Will Live in China and Abroad Interchangeably	23	10.6	10.7	67.0
	<b>Not sure yet</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>32.7</b>	<b>33.0</b>	100.0
	Total	215	99.1	100.0	
Missing System		2	.9		
Total		217	100.0		

This table shows that the slightly more than one third of the returnees are firm in that they will stay in China, or not go abroad again; another one third of them are not sure yet as to whether they will go abroad or not; only less than 20 percent of them are determined to go abroad again. The reasons for their doing so are as follows in Table 10.

Table 10. Returnees' Possible Reasons of Immigration to Host or Other Countries

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Readaptation Difficulty	9	4.1	4.8	4.8
	<b>Better Career Opportunities Abroad</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>28.1</b>	<b>32.4</b>	37.2
	<b>For the Education of Their Kid(s)</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>36.4</b>	<b>42.0</b>	79.3
	Other	39	18.0	20.7	100.0
	Total	188	86.6	100.0	
Missing System		29	13.4		
Total		217	100.0		

Surprisingly, the proportions of returnees who would immigrate for better career opportunities themselves and better education for their kids add up to 74.4 percent.

The next question asked is whether the returnees would send their children abroad to study if they do not emigrate out of China, 157 (75.5%) of the 208 who provided answers to this question answered "yes," which seems to suggest that the returnees do think that there will be better education opportunities for their children abroad, even though they knew that their children might also experience the inadaptation period upon coming back home.

#### 4.11. Causes for Inadaptation

In analyzing the causes for the returnees' inadaptation, 130 (59.9%) of the 165 who answered this question believed that not only they themselves, but also the people they come into contact with after they returned, have changed. As a consequence, they find themselves torn between the accustomed ease in living and working conditions abroad and the somewhat harsh status quo at home. Their perception of differences in working environment, promotion opportunities, income, and relationship differences among colleagues are as follows in Table 11.

Table 11. Returnees' Perception of Working Environment Difference between Present and When Abroad

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Better	54	24.9	27.4	27.4
	Almost the Same	72	33.2	36.5	64.0
	Worse	71	32.7	36.0	100.0
	Total	197	90.8	100.0	
Missing System		20	9.2		
Total		217	100.0		

Generally speaking, in terms of working environment, the returnees' perception is relatively negative, i.e. more than two thirds of them regard their current environment as worse, or at most the same as that when they were abroad. Only about a quarter perceives it as better than before.

However, in terms of opportunities for promotion, more than half of the returnees believe that their chances of being promoted are better than when they were abroad.

Table 12. Returnees' Perception of Promotion Opportunity Difference between the Present and When Abroad

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Better	115	53.0	58.1	58.1
	Almost the Same	59	27.2	29.8	87.9
	Worse	24	11.1	12.1	100.0
	Total	198	91.2	100.0	
Missing System		19	8.8		
Total		217	100.0		

In terms of the comparison of salary, the returnees have varied opinions, or no obvious pattern can be observed, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13. Returnees' Perception of Income Difference between the Present and When Abroad

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<b>Better</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>30.4</b>	<b>33.3</b>	33.3
	Almost the Same	52	24.0	26.3	59.6
	<b>Worse</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>36.9</b>	<b>40.4</b>	100.0
	Total	198	91.2	100.0	
Missing System		19	8.8		
Total		217	100.0		

In terms of colleague relationship, there seems to be no obvious advantage in any situation, as is shown in Table 14.

Table 14. Returnees' Perception of Colleague Relationship Difference between the Present and When Abroad

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<b>Better</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>34.6</b>	<b>38.1</b>	38.1
	<b>Almost the Same</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>40.1</b>	<b>44.2</b>	82.2
	Worse	35	16.1	17.8	100.0
	Total	197	90.8	100.0	
Missing System		20	9.2		
Total		217	100.0		

Of the total 217 returnees, though the percentage of those who need a longer readaptation period than their peers is not very significant, they admit that the following issues cause them anxiety and have a great impact on their readaptation process (Table 15).

Table 15. Anxiety Factors Contributing to Inadaptation

Factors Influencing the Readaptation Process	Frequency (out of 217)	Percentages (do not add up to 100% because of multiple answers from different returnees)
<b>Transportation</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>75.6%</b>
<b>Population</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>55.3%</b>
Security	44	20.3%
Inflation	93	42.9%
Disasters	41	18.9%
<b>Housing</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>63.6%</b>
<b>Medicare</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>49.8%</b>
Pressure	67	30.9%
Others	14	6.5%

#### 4.12. Readaptation Endeavors of the Returnees

When asked about whether they have done anything to speed up their readaptation process, almost 119 (nearly 56%) of the 216 informants answered that they had done nothing special to assist their readaptation, with the belief that time will help them to adapt to their quasi-new environment. On the other hand 44 (about 20%) strived to readapt themselves proactively, such as making new friends, getting advice from colleagues and friends, watching TV programs, and other activities that helped to reduce inadaptation. Finally, only 38 (18%) would choose to go back to their host country. The rest of the informants “noticed no obvious inadaptation after their reentry,” and thus needed no intentional readaptation.

#### 4.13. Selection of Returnees’ Description of Their Feelings in Readaptation

The above classification has not exhausted the returnees’ readaptation stories. The following are some excerpts from their own words, which serve as food for thought not only for the researchers, but also for readers:

**Returnee A:** The biggest frustrations for most of us are that 1) we cannot freely express our true feelings for fear of being regarded as a “weirdo.” We are constantly warned by friends and family to refrain from making complaints in public. In an extreme case, a returnee I knew personally remarked that he would ‘explode’ someday.

**Returnee B:** My problem is that I feel constantly torn between the thought of trying to accomplish something significant in my career, especially by employing what I have learned abroad, and the ineffective system I find myself in. To be more specific, we returnees from most Western countries have learned to function in the monochronic time orientation system, while, to our surprise, we are constantly trapped in the situation of polychronic system, which is characterized by short-notice and spontaneous behaviors. On the one hand, we long to be accepted as a member of the ingroup, e.g. we know that we should join our peers’ after-work gatherings for dinners or kara-okays, though we do not like it very much; on the other hand, we are also heavily influenced by the Western idea that the time slot after-work is generally reserved for our families. It is somewhat like the Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” decision, which proves to be a kind of torture to both the mind and body.

**Returnee C:** The way we returnees get along with our superiors is often mistaken as impolite both by the superiors themselves and by other colleagues. Having sojourned in the Western cultures for some time has somehow influenced how we get along with the bosses, that is, psychologically we have a tendency to shorten the distance between ourselves and our bosses, as a result of which our way of interacting with them has been affected.

**Returnee D:** When I first returned, I found myself “more stupid than before” in

negotiating meaning with others, for example, when dealing with staff members from various departments, I was often not too sure about what the latter meant. The following dialogues is a case in point:

**Returnee D:** *Morning, Mr ... I would like to talk to Director W. of your department. Could you help me to arrange the meeting?*

**Staff member F. from the Personnel Dept:** *I am sorry, but it is not convenient for W. to meet you today, because he has other commitments.*

**R.D.:** (Looking at his watch with a frown on his face) *When would it be possible then?*

**F.:** (somewhat irritated) *I don't know. I'm sorry.*

After I returned home, I told my wife about this incident during the day, and she explained that I should not have pressed F. for an immediate answer. Instead, I should have said something like: "OK. In that case, I'll come later to find out when it would be possible for W. to meet me. Thank you very much for the information." In this case, the staff member felt that I had not respected him or I had challenged his authority.

**Returnee E:** I know quite a few returnees, including myself, who find ourselves weaker at Chinese due to our long sojourn abroad, that is to say, our mother tongue Chinese seems to have failed at times. Besides, English words would often pop out of our mouths, which is perceived by colleagues as "showing-off" unconsciously, though in fact we didn't feel that way. We seemed to have forgotten Chinese characters which we should be very familiar with. This sometimes causes us embarrassment, for we do not want to be seen as "having forgotten our roots."

**Returnee F:** My overseas experience is a legacy for me seen as a whole, but it also has "side-effects." Sometimes a strange feeling prevails in me since I feel that I belong nowhere. I seem to be torn between the good things that I got used to abroad like efficiency and fairness, which I miss totally, and the warm feelings of being near friends and family at home.

#### 4.14. Discussion of the Results

The results of the present study are not totally in conformity with those in the related literature, especially in the following respects.

- 1) The returnee subjects of the present study did not seem to have a difficult or painful readaptation process as described in some other studies such as those by Butcher (2002), Ikonen (2007), or Groters (2013), etc. The reasons may be that the Chinese returnees do not want to acknowledge that they feel inadapted after reentry, or they do not think it is worth pointing out.
- 2) The inadaptation pattern of the returnees is quite predictable: they tend to feel unadapted in aspects where China is relatively weak at, e.g. housing, food safety, educational facilities, etc., and they miss things that they liked when they were abroad.

- 3) What is note-worthy is that the way some returnees let their inadaptation symptoms go off-record: According to a returnee couple that the authors know personally, their thinking, which is quite representative, is that “Since we are back in China now, we must do what the majority does. We don’t want others to think that we are different only because of our overseas experience, or we are trying to show off this experience of ours in one way or another. In fact we have always tried to keep a low key reentry.” From this remark, we can infer that even the way returnees deal with readaptation is subject to the influence of culture, i.e. the traditional Chinese values dictate the returnees’ behavior in obvious and subtle ways.
- 4) From the statistics shown, we can infer that in some cases the returnees are not well-prepared for their reentry. If they are willing to spend some time in familiarizing themselves with the policies for returnees, or matching their pre-entry expectations with the reality in China, they will have a higher likelihood of lessening their inadaptation time. Rujipak’s (2009) study showed that the Thai difficulties in readapting themselves arose from a sense of loss of their gradually-becoming-used-to overseas context as well as a loss of freedom and privacy; the present study confirms this claim partially. Rujipak’s (2009) study also found that the degree of readjustment difficulties was related to the gap between the home and host culture, and the differences between initial expectations and the reality of the transition experience, but this study has found no proof of whether the similarity between the host culture and Chinese culture will have any bearing on the readaptation time.
- 5) In view of the fact that the large numbers of returnees have returned to China to “make China a better place” (in the words of one returnee from Australia), the researchers believe that a feasible solution for the related governmental agencies/institutions in China is: If they can provide some reentry orientation/training courses, it will certainly help the returnees to readapt themselves faster, and hence increase the productivity of the returnees.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Major Findings

- 1) The demographic features of the returnees are relatively homogeneous, i.e. the majority of them have been abroad for educational purposes, and have returned for better career development opportunities. More often than not, the returnees have high expectations for their living and working conditions after return.
- 2) Like it or not, returnees have experienced inadaptation upon return, but their inadaptation symptoms vary in length (from months to years), severity (some felt severer inadaptation than others) and contents (e.g. food safety, housing, transportation, etc.).
- 3) The most frequently mentioned causes for the returnees’ inadaptation is the great discrepancies between their expectations and the reality, self- and other change.

Objectively, the aspects where China is relatively undeveloped aggravate their inadaptation, for example, infrastructure inadequacy, educational facilities for their children, etc.; subjectively, they tend to feel inadapted to their once familiar home surroundings because they themselves have changed to a great extent while their peers who stayed inside the country have not made so many changes as they have. Thus when the former interact with the latter, a feeling of inadaptation develops.

- 4) A large majority of the returnees have rated their overseas experience as important and indispensable, which benefited them greatly in language, culture, communication competence, academic degrees and managing experience and skills.
- 5) Less than half of the returnees have proactively dealt with the inadaptation problem, and the rest have just adopted the “let-it-be” attitude. The reasons behind this phenomenon may either be the common belief that reentry inadaptation is self-curable, or that it is beyond the returnees’ realization.

## 5.2. Limitations of the Present Study and Suggestions for Future Research

Given the short time for data collection, the present study is limited in the following ways, which could be addressed in future studies.

- 1) The present study mainly depended on questionnaire data, with limited quotes from the informants. In future studies data types can be enriched, e.g., to include in-depth interviews and focus groups, in order to ensure a deeper understanding of the reentry process. Ideally, data can be collected from groups who have received readaptation coaching and from those who have not.
- 2) Perspectives of analysis can be more varied, e.g. to include the returnees’ colleagues and family members to make judgments on the latter’s readaptation progress. Comparison and contrast of self- and other reports would yield interesting results.
- 3) Contrastive studies can also be conducted to compare and contrast the expatriates’ acculturation process and the returnees’ readaptation process.
- 4) Longitudinal studies of the returnees’ readaption process can also be encouraged.
- 5) The effectiveness of reentry training courses can be measured in terms of how they can shorten the period of the returnees’ reentry adaptation.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire on Chinese Returnees' Reentry Shock and Re-adaptation

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for your participation in the survey on Chinese (student) returnees' psychological, socio-cultural re-adaptation and cultural identity change. This will be an anonymous questionnaire used exclusively for academic purposes. The survey is conducted with the purpose of improving policies for the returnees on the part of the state.

In the following questions, please circle the choice or choices that best suits your situations or feelings and give your own answer(s) if necessary. Honest responses will be highly appreciated. Thanks again for your participation!

#### Basic Information

Age:

Gender:  male  female

Host country \_\_\_\_\_

Months abroad \_\_\_\_\_

Education completed currently  PhD  Master  Bachelor  High school

#### I. Questions about your overseas experiences.

##### 1. What was the major purpose of your going abroad?

- A. I think there would be better educational resources.
- B. I think it would be easier for me to secure a job when I come back.
- C. I just wanted to have more experiences and to know more about a new culture.
- D. I just wanted to improve my foreign language.
- E. To make my immigration into that country easier.
- F. Other \_\_\_\_\_

##### 2. How did you make a living in the foreign country?

- A. Supported by my parents or relatives.

- B. On a scholarship.
  - C. Covered by the company.
  - D. I worked there.
  - E. Self-financed.
  - F. Other \_\_\_\_\_ (please note).
- 3. Do you have any overseas working experience?**
- A. Yes
  - B. No
- 4. Were you accompanied in the foreign country?**
- A. No, I was there alone.
  - B. Yes, I had relatives in the host country.
  - C. Yes, I had my family members in the host country.
  - D. My family or relatives joined me later.
- 5. What was the main reason when you decided to return?**
- A. To serve the motherland.
  - B. To pursue career development.
  - C. To take care of parents or kid(s) or other relatives.
  - D. To get married.
  - E. Forced to come back due to the validation date of the visa.
  - F. Difficulties in completely adjusting to cultural differences between home and host countries.
  - G. Other \_\_\_\_\_

## II. Questions about your present situation.

- 6. Where are you affiliated to now?**
- A. A state-owned company.
  - B. A joint-venture company
  - C. A foreign-owned company
  - D. A governmental institution
  - E. A private enterprise.
  - F. I have my own company.
  - G. An educational institution.
  - H. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. How long did it take you to find the first job after you returned?**
- A. I got an offer before I came back.
  - B. Less than 3 months.
  - C. Less than 6 months
  - D. Less than one year
  - E. More than one year
  - F. Not found one yet
- 8. Does the current job meet your previous expectations?**
- A. Better than my expectation.
  - B. Basically the same as my expectation.

C. Worse than my expectation.

**9. Can you use what you have learnt abroad in your current job?**

- A. I can use what I have learnt abroad ultimately.
- B. To some extent, I can use what I have learnt abroad.
- C. I can use only a little of my knowledge learnt abroad.
- D. Not at all.

**10. Do you think the current environment in China is suitable for the returnees to start their own business?**

- A. Very good.
- B. Good but needs improvement.
- C. Not suitable at all.

**11. Which of the following aspects do you find satisfactory in China? (You can choose more than one)**

- A. Salary.
- B. Welfare and insurance.
- C. Education.
- D. Residential standard.
- E. Potential for career improvement.
- F. Market potential.
- G. Interpersonal relationship.

**12. What is your expected monthly salary in RMB?**

- A. 5000~10000.
- B. 10000~15000.
- C. 15000~20000.
- D. 20000 or above.
- E. Other (please note)\_\_\_\_\_

**13. What is your position expectation?**

- A. Supporting staff
- B. Normal agent
- C. Leader of a group
- D. Department manager
- E. Company manager
- F. Other (please note)\_\_\_\_\_

**14. Are these expectations specified in questions 12 and 13 met?**

- A. Both are met.
- B. Partially met.
- C. Neither is met.

**15. Your living condition in the host country was that \_\_\_\_\_**

- A. I basically lived a student's life.
- B. I had a small salary but could support myself.
- C. I lived a middle class life.
- D. I had my own profitable business.
- E. Other (please note) \_\_\_\_\_

- 16. The living condition of you now is \_\_\_\_ .**
- A. I earned almost as much as I earned abroad.
  - B. I earned much less than I did abroad.
  - C. I earned much more than I did abroad.
- 17. Have you sensed any difference(s) between you and your colleagues doing the same job who have no overseas experience?**
- A. I have a widened vision, but I am not very familiar with the domestic issues as they are.
  - B. I have sensed no difference in terms of vision, but I regard myself as more qualified for the job than they are.
  - C. I have the feeling that my colleagues think that I am not so flexible as they are, and I do believe that I should learn from them.
  - D. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- 18. What is your perception of your overseas experience?**
- A. It is very important for me, and without it I cannot get to where I am today.
  - B. Nothing significant, just a life experience.
  - C. I regretted being abroad because of the opportunity cost at home.
- 19. Which of the following benefits you most when you returned home? (You can choose more than one)**
- A. Language skills
  - B. Expertise
  - C. Overseas degree
  - D. Administrative skills
  - E. Understanding of the different cultural norms
  - F. Communication style and skills
- 20. How long did it take you to readapt to home surroundings?**
- A. About 3 months
  - B. About 6 months
  - C. About a year
  - D. It took me the same length of time as being abroad.
  - E. Other (please note) \_\_\_\_\_
- 21. Do you plan to immigrate to your host country or another country in the future?**
- A. Yes.
  - B. No.
  - C. I will live at home and abroad interchangeably.
  - D. Not sure yet.
- 22. If you choose to immigrate to your host country or another country, what is the possible reason?**
- A. Readaptation is difficult for me.
  - B. There will be better career opportunities abroad.
  - C. For the education of my kid(s).
  - D. Other (please note) \_\_\_\_\_
- 23. If your answer to question 21 is no, why?**
- A. I have a stable job and a comfortable life in China.

B. I just stay in China for family reasons.

C. Other \_\_\_\_\_

**24. Are you willing to send your kid(s) to study abroad?**

A. Yes.

B. No.

C. Not sure yet.

**25. Do you find that people have changed in China during your absence? If your answer is yes, please write down the changes.**

A. Yes, a little, for example, \_\_\_\_\_

B. Yes, a lot, for example, \_\_\_\_\_

### III. Comparison between your overseas and your present situations.

**26. Comparing with the (temporary or permanent) job you had abroad, what do you think of the following aspects in China? In terms of \_\_\_\_\_, your present job is \_\_\_\_\_.**

(1). Working environments

A. better      B. almost the same      C. worse

(2). Promotion opportunity

A. better      B. almost the same      C. worse

(3). Salary

A. better      B. almost the same      C. worse

(4). Colleague relationship

A. better      B. almost the same      C. worse

**27. Which of the following aspects cause(s) you the most anxiety in China? (You can choose more than one, but be sure to number them).**

A. Traffic

B. Population

C. Security

D. Inflation

E. Natural disaster

F. Housing price

G. Medical care

H. Job pressure

I. Other \_\_\_\_\_.

**28. Regarding the answer(s) you have chosen in question 27, which of the following opinions do you agree with?**

A. The problem(s) is/are almost unbearable to me, so I will go abroad if no changes take place.

B. I believe that this/these problem(s) can be solved in the (near) future and I still choose to stay in China even the problem(s) cannot be solved.

C. I need more time, maybe several years, to become accustomed to the problem(s) mentioned above.

D. I don't particularly care about this/these problem(s) because no matter where people live, there will be problems.



**V. Your views (Please answer the following questions).**

- 35. What is China's image in your host country?**
  
- 36. Are you familiar with the policies for returnees in China? Do you think there is room for agreement?**
  
- 37. Can you recall the aspects that you felt most difficult to adjust to at the time of reentry?**
  
- 38. After reentry, when did you begin to feel strongest inadaptation? How long does it take to recover?**
  
- 39. Why do you think you could not adjust to the aspects you mentioned?**
  
- 40. Have you done anything to cope with this problem?**

**Thank you very much for your cooperation!**