



Original Article

# How Transnational Experiences and Political, Economic Policies Inform Transnational Intellectuals' Identities and Mobility: An Autoethnographic Study

Yang Gao

Dalian Maritime University, Dalian, China.

E-mail: gaoyang666@dlmu.edu.cn

Using sociocultural theory as the theoretical stance and autoethnography as the tool, this paper explores how transnational, lived experiences and political, economic policies in higher education have re/shaped a transnational intellectual's identities and mobility. Instead of simply confirming transnationals' identities are multiple, complex, and recurring during the transnational process, this paper fills a gap in the existing literature by informing that transnational identity development can be used as an analytical tool to advocate for social justice and to develop teacher education programs in different international settings. It also indicates that sustainability of the multiple identities requires critical thinking and intellectual agency. Finally, the paper proposes a conceptual framework to study transnational identities and mobility.

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## Introduction

As trade conflicts have escalated to a *trade war*<sup>1</sup> between the USA and China, I have become increasingly sensitive to geopolitical news. As both a transnational from China to the USA and a scholar, I used to think I was far removed from politics, and vice versa. I viewed myself as a global citizen, contributing to academia and scholarship in my own way. However, as the situation becomes more and more tense, I have already experienced changes in my life and believe those changes were rendered by political and economic factors either explicitly or implicitly.

The trade war example may serve as a precursor to a bigger picture: Political and economic policies may affect intellectual mobility, either positively or negatively. On one hand, favorable, bilateral policies between countries may pave the way for

students from one country to move to another; a strong benefit and salary package from one country may also attract scholars or students. For example, the *One Belt One Road initiative*<sup>2</sup> in China has not only brought about investment in/funding to the African and European countries included, but has also opened the door for international students from those countries to study in China. On the other hand, unfavorable policies may curb the import and export of not only goods, but also intellectuals. Specifically, as the trade war tension between the two countries increases, some Chinese or Chinese-American university professors in the USA have been fired or ousted. For example, Ackerman (2019) reported that three scientists had been ousted by MD Anderson over concerns about Chinese conflicts of interest; the well-known cancer center had invoked the termination process for the three National Institutes of Health (NIH)-identified professors. Dr. Peter Pisters, president of MD Anderson, responded that this was an action after having received NIH letter about research funding investigation. Similarly, according to Green and Poritz (2019), two tenured professors and co-lab leaders in the School of Medicine's Department of Human Genetics at Emory University were fired due to disclosed grants they had received from institutions in China. Emory's internal investigation also came after the NIH had sent a letter to several universities regarding research funding.

Policies that limit significant geographical movement may have wide-reaching effects. Moore *et al.* (2002) argued that individuals' location in social space can be undermined by policies or institutions that require conformity, which could then marginalize their identities and positionings in that space. In this paper, I discuss how political and economic factors, together with transnational experiences, have informed my identity development and mobility. Specifically, I talk about how my identities as a transnational learner, teacher, and researcher have changed over the years alongside national policy changes. Through a narrative, autoethnographic perspective, I elaborate on the specific aspects of these changes to my life and career through my lived experiences and individual examples. Taking a sociocultural stance, I extend my description of the changes with theoretical references or empirical studies from the existing literature.

## Literature Review

### Globalism, transnational mobility, and transnational experiences

"No country is immune from the globalization process or its impact" (McNally, 2001, 96). This process penetrates various aspects of society (Sklair, 2002), including higher education. Van der Wende (2007) argued that the process of internationalizing higher education helps meet the demands and challenges of social, economic, and labor market globalization. Specifically, it produces a global



flow of people, information, knowledge, education services, and financial capital. (Kerr, 1994; Kim, 2008, 2009).

Kim (2010) argued that a primary effect of globalization is the change in academic mobility. From a macro perspective, academic mobility increases opportunities for research cooperation and thus enhances research quality in general (Marginson and van der Wende, 2007). In addition, academic mobility also helps recoup weaknesses or shortages in research methods among developing countries. From a micro perspective, academic mobility influences transnational intellectual mobility. Specifically, academic mobility shapes transnationals' career paths and provides them with employment opportunities. Waibel *et al.* (2017) found that transnational experiences relate to three types of career outcomes: career planning skills, transition into employment, and professional status or income. They also found a moderate, positive effect of academic mobility on income after transnational student graduation.

Transnational mobility brings about transnational experiences. Mok *et al.* (2018) found that transnational intellectuals or students highly rate their learning experiences for hard knowledge, but also in soft skills and cross-cultural understanding. Participants in that study believed that their international and transnational learning experiences contributed positively to their career development. The researchers noticed that most of the graduates in their study, however, came from relatively successful families and secured their first job through social networks. This could indicate that transnational and overseas study may perpetuate social inequality.

### **Transnational intellectual mobility and continuity**

Over the last few decades, the existing literature has covered transnational academic mobility from two perspectives: a political and economic perspective (e.g., Rizvi, 2005; Solimano, 2006; Welch and Zhen, 2008) and a sociological and anthropological perspective (e.g., Beck, 2009; Urry, 2000). Those taking a political and economic stance have studied the topic from the perspective of brain drain, brain gain, and brain regain. This perspective, also known as the circulation perspective, focuses on the complex relationships among education, migration, educational investments, and trans/international development (Rizvi, 2005). Behind these terms stands the principle of human capital flight, which refers to the emigration or immigration of individuals who have received advanced training or education. In short, the net benefits of human capital flight for the receiving country are defined as a brain gain, whereas the net costs for the sending country are sometimes referred to as a brain drain.

Solimano (2006) argued that the emigration of highly educated students from developed countries has negative effects on these countries. In providing educational resources, these countries have fostered these students as an

educational investment. The loss of talents and educational investments in the home countries serves as the basic principle of “brain drain.” In terms of employment, in a country that experiences a surplus of graduates, the immigration of foreign-trained professionals can aggravate the underemployment of domestic graduates. With this economic concern, Eckert *et al.* (2003) reported the tension caused by rapidly increasing rates of brain drain in developing countries and the significant emigration that would delay the economic growth of these countries in their World Bank report. Opponents of the brain drain theory argue that the transnational intellectual mobility might bring back potential benefits to their country of origin, which is termed as brain gain or circulation (Brown, 2002; Solimano, 2006; Welch and Zhen, 2008). Similarly, Chen (2018) argued that the “flow of global talent can be a powerful vehicle for enhancing knowledge exchange and global connectivity, which in turn boosts international cooperation and development” (p. 34). The concept of brain circulation has been widely accepted with political power and talent policies between countries (Tomlinson, 1999). Tomlinson (1999) argued that transnational intellectual mobility has historically been closely connected with a political “power container” (p. 104).

In addition to the political and economic stance, a sociological and anthropological perspective has been fostered over the last decade to discuss concepts such as cultures and space that transnational intellectuals are involved in during the mobile process (e.g., Appadurai, 2001; Fahey and Kenway, 2010; Kim, 2010). Specifically, Appadurai (2001) stated that transnational academic mobility is not taking place only in a global economic and political space, but also in a cultural space that involves peoples’ identities and the sustainability of these identities. Following Appadurai’s work, Fahey and Kenway (2010) from a historical and cultural perspective, proposed the term *Emoscapes*, to include the movement and mobilization of emotion on intersecting global, national and personal scales when studying transnational mobility. Kim (2010) studied transnational identity capital among mobile scholars in the UK and explored the relations of academic intellectuals and their spatial knowledge. She argued that transnational intellectuals, as both insiders and outsiders, may create new paradigms of knowledge and academic work.

Neither the political nor the sociological stance considers the cognitive or psychological lens that intellectuals themselves use to perceive and define their identities during the transnational mobile process. An identity is “mostly autonomous and frequently directed by its owner” (Olsen, 2008), and thus worth being studied by incorporating the owner’s perspective. Therefore, taking the psychological lens into account in future theoretical stances is necessary. This study addressed the gap by incorporating transnational identities into transnational mobility studies.



## Transnational identities

As discussed in the previous section, transnational mobility shapes transnational identities. Transnational identities thus possess unique features that differ from intellectual identities firmly grounded in one culture or place (De Fina, 2016). First, in transnational spaces, individuals and communities have a variety of linguistic resources. The function of language thus plays a very important role in transnationals' identity development; it works on transnational identities both externally and internally. From an external perspective, exposure to social media equips transnationals with access to their heritage culture and new culture simultaneously. Texts, news, and illustrations in different languages through social media provide transnationals with updates about their country of origin and thus remind the transnationals of their heritage culture (Fuller, 2007). They also provide the transnationals with information about the new culture and can influence thought process and behavior. Internally, transnationals convey power and knowledge through the languages and discourses that define and regulate social norms, disciplines, and practices (Norton, 2000); the conveying process defines and regulates the transnationals' identity development and works closely on their human agency (De Costa and Norton, 2017).

Second, transnational identities are dynamic and evolving. Together with transnational mobility, movement, and relocation, transnational identities emerge and develop and can be studied through a scalar approach. Canagarajah and De Costa (2016) argued that scales shift the relationship between context and language, through which transnational identities emerge and develop. The traditional view perceives identity as something grounded in a specific geographic location and speech community; however, this "boundedness and stability cannot account for language variation and identity formation among mobile individuals and communities" (De Fina, 2016, 167).

Third, transnational identities, instead of being stable or uniformed, are hybrid and diverse. This attribute informs the dynamic and evolving feature of transnational identities and echoes the nature of the transnationals themselves, who are diasporic, mobile, and de-territorialized (Baynham and De Fina 2005; De Fina and Perrino 2013). For example, Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2005) challenged the concept of identity as something coherent, rational, and continuous in nature. Similarly, Baxter (2014) argued that identities are fragmented, multivocal, discontinuous and contradictory. Taking all these features into consideration strengthens the argument that transnational identities should be studied through a theoretical lens that includes contexts, languages, experiences, activities, and psychological factors.

## Sociocultural Theory as Theoretical Stance

The theoretical lens required for the current research needed to incorporate psychological theories and accommodate my specific transnational experiences and multiple identities: from a language learner to a language teacher, and then to a language researcher. I found sociocultural theory to be a fit theoretical lens.

Sociocultural theory, with derived tenets from social psychology, social anthropology, sociolinguistics, and philosophy, provides contemporary social science with a helpful stance to study identities. It explores the interconnections among persons, contexts, history, and others, and perceives learning and development through a mediated process with objects, peers, others, and individual identities. In terms of identity studies, a sociocultural theory perspective considers people to be products of their own social histories. Constructs including hope, desperation, imagining, and mindfulness serve as mediators to help people develop their own identities through the social history construction process. Transnationals move from one type of subjectivity and identity to another as they map out excerpts in their own social histories.

Another construct that sociocultural theory emphasizes is intellectual agency in the developmental process of learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), the mind is socially distributed beyond individual people. Cognitive development is thus not a matter of the enculturation or appropriation of existing sociocultural resources and practices, but instead the reconstruction and transformation of those resources and practices in ways that are responsive to both individual and local needs. Throughout the cognitive development process, a person's agency plays an essential role in regulating the constructs and mediators involved. Specifically, agency interacts with social activities and the language used to regulate activities in historically and culturally situated ways. It indicates that the development of transnational identities requires effort. Without deliberation and agentive efforts, transnational identities may not develop even with space and location changes. As Rogoff (2003) explained, "development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities—which also change" (p. 3–4).

## Methodology: Autoethnography

De Fina (2016) argued that "sociocultural linguistic studies of transnational identities are generally oriented towards qualitative methodologies and close analyses of linguistic and other types of semiotic practices" (p. 169). I thus choose autoethnography as the tool for this current study. Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). The definition of autoethnography is congruent with narrative inquiry in terms of the



story-telling feature being intrinsic to the study. First, narrative inquirers explore values, beliefs, and cultural constructs through intense and transparent reflection and critical thinking. Through narratives, an autoethnographic scholar provides information on his/her own “voice, stance, assumptions and analytical lens so that the reader is abundantly clear on whose story is whose” (Connolly, 2007, p. 453). All these values and constructs are essential to identity studies.

In addition to the psychological value an autoethnography may provide, another advantage is the rich data it may provide to the readers (Pavlenko, 2002). Ellis (2007) argued that “doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience” (p. 14). Through the back-and-forth process, rich data are gradually accrued and then support the themes an autoethnographic study aims to generate. Because transnational identities are complex and evolving, it requires substantial data to depict and map out the developing trends and changes of transnational identities. An autoethnography, which generally includes data and lived experience excerpts in years or decades, thus serves as a helpful tool to record and depict these trends and changes.

Finally, an autoethnography method helps explore the constructs involved in studying transnational identities. Clandinin (2006) highlighted features of the narrative inquiry (including *temporality*, *sociality*, and *place*) that informed researchers on specific, methodological applications. As time and place are recurring constructs in transnational identity studies, choosing a narrative inquiry method helps inform these studies. Therefore, in terms of the psychological values, rich data, and constructs studied, an autoethnography was determined to be the best fit tool to study transnational identities and mobility. I will cover my time as a transnational from 2011 to the present in the following section.

## **Narrating Lived Experiences Through an Autoethnography**

In 2011, while living in my home country of China, I decided to study abroad in the USA. In addition to my personal preferences, one of the factors that helped me to reach that decision was the favorable political and economic policies between the two countries at that time. China highly encouraged students to study abroad. The government and Ministry of Education would even sponsor students’ tuition and living expenses. This kind of sponsorship has been granted for years through the China Scholarship Council (CSC), who signed contracts with sponsored students asking them to serve in China for a few terms or years after graduation. I did not choose the sponsorship from the CSC, as I was not sure if I would come back to China. It had nothing with nationalism or patriotism. It was only because, as a young scholar, I at that time was still worshiping freedom and curious about exploring the world without setting up a final destination after graduation. In terms

of incoming students, some states in the USA, since the Great Recession in 2009, favored international student visas in a way to boom the state economy. With these favorable policies in place from the two countries, I started my journey of doing a PhD in the USA.

My first few years (2012–2015) in the USA involved doctoral coursework. This stage provided me with a unique community of practice and a significantly different language-learning context. Specifically, as a non-native speaker of English, my learning experience with the English language emerged as the first factor to inform my transnational identities. I did experience quite a lot of dissonance in the learning experience. For example, I was taught British English in China but acquired American English gradually when I moved to the USA. In addition, learning colloquial but authentic expressions in the language made me realize that the syntactic or morphological rules that I had learned in China could not always be applied. These kinds of doubts, rejections, and denials helped to develop my critical thinking and served as the foundation to develop my awareness of identity. My identity as a learner started at this stage; it gradually impacted not only my language but also my mind. This learning experience was built on the volume of social and academic discourse, community of speech, social activities and events, and my own agency to think and reflect. It echoes the tenets from sociocultural theory that position social activities and the language used to regulate learning and development into historical and cultural contexts (Lantoff, 2012).

Denial of my previously formed values or beliefs about the target culture also occurred at this stage (2012–2015). As I gradually made more American friends and talked with my colleagues in the USA, I heard about social injustice and complaints about the president or presidential candidates. For example, President Barack Obama spoke at our campus in 2012. My colleagues and peers showed different attitudes toward the event. Some professors complained about some of the president's educational policies in class and argued their inadequacies. Communication with American students and professors opened my eyes to this target culture, and I began pondering the faults that American culture may have. This experience helped me reflect on cultures in general and developed my critical thinking.

My colleagues and professors also helped me to rebuild my self-esteem and image and fundamentally changed my perceptions and understanding about a few things. For example, when I was in China, I thought it showed status to have an English name. When I came to the USA in the first few months, I introduced myself with that English name to my American friends and professors. One day, however, one of my professors questioned why I needed that English name and suggested I use my Chinese name to represent my authentic identity. I had not been able to understand identity until that moment. I acknowledged the advice and guidance from that professor; I also began questioning some beliefs or stereotypes that I had





formed in China. As I gradually developed my perceptions about the culture, I developed my way of thinking.

As I gradually moved in my doctoral trajectory, one skill I developed is critical thinking. I began challenging some of my former beliefs. For example, before I came to the USA I used to regard myself as a “victim” of the standardized education in China, and thought I had suffered too much from my high school learning experience. I woke up between 5 and 6 AM as a high school student and spent the entire day learning and studying at school. As students, most of us had few breaks or holidays throughout the year. In addition to the required courses at school, we were preoccupied with extra classes in different subjects. We completed a high number of tests, quizzes, and exams every semester and prepared for our entrance exam to college. This kind of crammed schooling system seemed like “torture” for me at that time. However, from a behavioristic perspective, it developed our test-taking skills, diligence, and patience; it also improved our subject matter learning. It was not until the second year in my doctoral program that I began appreciating and acknowledging the work ethic learned at my high school. I earned a few research awards in my affiliated school and some national associations. Without that hectic schedule in high school and pressure from fierce competition among peers, I may not have developed my diligence and time management skills.

A few other events also occurred at that time and helped me re-evaluate my own culture. For example, in 2013, Ohio fully implemented the Common Core program in public schools. One of the reasons for the national advocacy and implementation of this program may be the comparison and evaluation of its international standardized testing scores and ranking. For the first time, standardization outperformed diversity and creativity in the American education system. It was also at that time (2011) the best seller *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* swept the USA and to some extent changed the dominant values or beliefs about American education. The book’s author is a Chinese-American professor, Amy Chua, who taught her children using strict, traditional Chinese methods. While the book aroused controversial debate on the Chinese way of schooling, Chua’s children did have superior academic achievements and standardized testing scores. My beliefs about standardized education did change at that time; for the first time, I believed that crammed schooling helps students with their learning, particularly in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects.

Identities are changed or developed through social events and contextual factors. In May 2018, after graduating with my PhD, I relocated to the Bay area in California. This relocation was rendered by a few contextual and personal factors. Specifically, in order to embrace academic diversity, the university where I completed PhD preferred to hire new faculty members from other universities. This policy led me to look for other universities or contexts to sustain my professional identities as a teacher and scholar. I was also personally willing to move

somewhere more multicultural and populous. Relocation led me to a new environment and a new round of community of practice and dialogues. Working with more international scholars improved and deepened my understanding of multiculturalism without racism or discrimination. The process echoes what Vygotsky coined the zone of proximal development (ZPD), arguing that a novice's learning always occurs through the assistance of a more capable person or an expert. ZPD provides a prospective view of cognitive development, as opposed to a retrospective view that characterizes development in terms of a personal's independent capabilities. In addition to the professional skills I developed, another benefit I gained at this period (2018–2019) was the emphatic and affective development. Working with other international scholars also further developed my empathy and helped me understand how ignorance of different cultural and ethnic factors may cause tensions among races and ethnicities.

One source that helped me foster that kind of integrative awareness was my own teaching practice and reflection. This, in a sociocultural lens, reflects the importance of human agency. I began teaching a new course about language, culture, and ethnicity in the USA. The course was embedded in sociolinguistics and was something I had never taught before I moved to the Bay area. Through preparing for my lectures, I gradually learned more about ethnicities in California and the greater USA. These kinds of learning and teaching experiences helped me understand racial and ethnic tensions among different peoples in the USA and thus build a more accepting identity for myself.

A few key events prompted me to reach out to this new stage of cultural identity. First, I volunteered to be a lecturer representative for my department right after I began my first semester in California. I wanted to befriend my new colleagues and contribute to the department. I do not believe I embodied a multicultural identity in this stage. While I attempted to contribute, I still found my Asian-Chinese cultural background constricted my voice. However, I found myself at least aware of social justice issues among colleagues from different cultural backgrounds and attempted to do whatever I could to help release any tensions or conflicts in my department.

The increasing economic and political tensions or conflicts between the USA and China also led me to reflect on my cultural identity and professional identity. While I am not an expert in international politics and economics, I do understand the possible tensions among politics, economics, and employment. As mentioned above, in 2011, I made my decision in China to study abroad due to the favorable political and economic policies from the two countries at that time. However, in 2019, triggered by the trade war, policies for international scholars and students from China to the USA have been changed. For example, in 2019, student visa process or screening time for students from China to study in the USA has been delayed and prolonged over months. On June 4, 2019, the Ministry of Education in China, through the State Council Information Office, released the No.1 Precautious Report to students who want to study in the USA. The Report warns the students to



prepare fully for the visa application and allow for more time for the visa screening and checking process.

In response, university presidents, including those at Sandford and Yale, formally addressed international students to reassure them of their “steadfast commitment.” On May 23, 2019, in a letter to all international students at Yale, President Peter Salovey remarked: “In recent weeks, tensions in United States–China relations and increased scrutiny of academic exchanges have added to a sense of unease among many international students and scholars here at Yale and at universities across the country.” He ended the letter with the statement that “openness—a key to the extraordinary success of America’s great research universities—must remain a hallmark of Yale” (Salovey, 2019, May 23).

Exposure to the media has created a sense of insecurity in me. From the technological competition to reach 5G to the increasingly tightened visa sponsorship for Chinese students or professors, current events deteriorate my sense of insecurity as a transnational scholar and practitioner. This kind of insecurity caused me to make a few updates to my professional and personal trajectory. In addition, the political and economic policy affected the institutional policy. Most of the universities could not sponsor international faculties with their H1B visas. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) defines the H1B visa as an employment-based visa type for temporary workers including international students, graduates, or people with a non-immigrant status. To obtain such a visa, an employer in the USA must offer a job and apply for the H1B visa petition for the applicant through USCIS. This approved petition is a work permit which allows the applicant to obtain a visa stamp and work in the USA for that employer.

However, the reality is that my university in the Bay area could not sponsor my H1B visa, which helped sustain my legal working status in the USA. I understood this situation when I signed the contract and was looking for other opportunities or employers for several months during my contract term. I completed a few interviews with some top universities in the USA and even moved to the next hiring stage in one instance. However, each university ultimately had to choose other candidates due to the H1B sponsorship issue. I understand that tensions between the two countries might not be the only decisive factor. There are also other issues with H1B sponsorship; for example, employers need to pay extra for the sponsorship application of international faculty members. Recently, there are more denied H1B petitions than in the past. To be more specific, the denial rate of H1B has increased from 6% in 2015 to 24% in the third quarter in 2019 (National Foundation for American Policy, 2019). With increased tensions, one of the decisions I have made is to secure a tenure-track position in higher education in China. In that situation, I needed to relocate to another country to sustain my professional identity as a scholar. China, as my home country, became my top choice.

Another contributing factor to the decision to return was the Chinese government's favorable benefits and policy toward overseas-educated Chinese returnees. Statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education show that China has witnessed an upsurge in the number of overseas-educated Chinese returning to their homeland for work—from 20,000 in 2003 to a notable 42,000 in 2006 (Xinhuanet Reporter, 2007). Recent evidence from Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) further confirms that the rapid economic and political development in China has significantly improved the number and quality of opportunities available for those educated graduates who return (OECD, 2012). The Chinese government's sustained policy endeavors to attract the return of the country's expatriate talent is reported as a key pull factor (Wang and Miao, 2013).

I thus made another round of relocation in July 2019. This led to another round of social activities, community of practice, and collaborative dialogues that relate to relocation and mobility. With the relocation, my professional researcher and teacher identity have also been changed. One of the career paths for PhD holders is to become a tenured professor in higher education, something I have been working toward. However, different countries have different academic ideologies and tenure-track systems. For example, as one of the promotion requirements, the tenure-track system in China requires faculty members to publish papers in social science citation index (SSCI) or arts & humanities citation index (A&HCI) journals. Most papers in these journals are empirical and data-driven. Specifically, articles in these journals use primarily quantitative methods. With statistics and data, quantitative studies yield findings which are generalizable. These generalizable findings can be more frequently cited and referenced than findings from qualitative studies, which boosts the authors and their affiliates' reputation and world ranking. However, due their different epistemologies and ontologies, not all disciplines fit the quantitative method. My line of inquiry has been in qualitative studies over the years. While I did publish some articles using mixed-methods and quantitative methods, I personally prefer qualitative methods and believe they fit my line of inquiry. While researchers in China have been advocating for qualitative studies in recent years, qualitative methods in China are still less developed than those in the USA. Changing my methods and line of inquiry indicates a change in my professional identity.

I might also change my identity as a teacher with the decision to relocate. To be more specific, I must decide what kind of teacher I want to be, and what kind of teacher I have to be. For example, after working and studying in the USA for years, I went back to China in 2013 to teach a summer session to Chinese students learning English. I had taken it for granted that my learning and teaching experiences gained from the USA would benefit my Chinese students. However, some of the techniques or strategies I used during the summer did not work well. While some students favored my class design, some others thought it was a waste of time to “play” in class, i.e., being assigned more activities and reflective time.



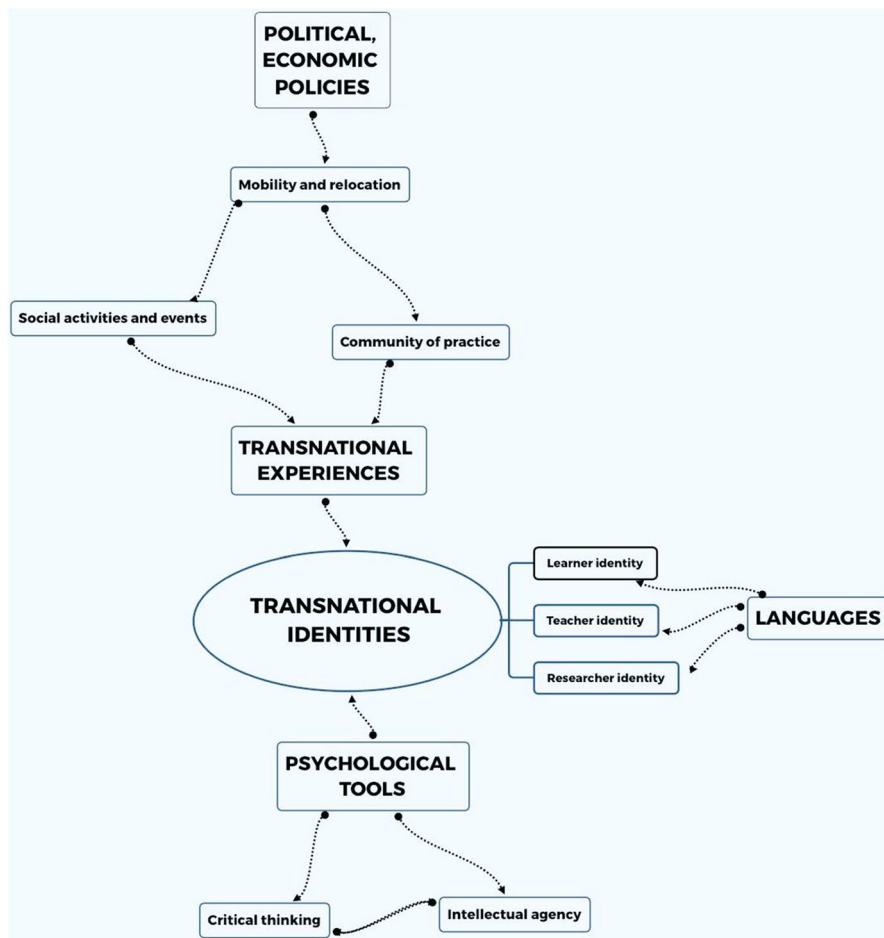
This revealed an issue: Does my American experience really benefit my teaching and my students? Students in a functional ideology prefer test-taking strategies and core, linguistic knowledge that helps them improve their language proficiency, which then helps them meet future career requirements. In this vein, teachers in China pay more attention to delivering knowledge than to guiding students through hands-on experiences. In American classrooms I use many trans-mediators, including picture books, video clips, group discussion to engage my students to learn by themselves. This might not be feasible in Chinese classrooms—or at least cannot be used frequently. Changing my spatial location to teach thus changes my identity as a constructivist teacher, in terms of my teacher beliefs and practice.

## Discussion

My analysis of my own experiences as a transnational intellectual adds to the existing literature and even extends the literature with a proposed model (see Figure 1). Wenger (1998) argued that one's identity is found in the way that identity is lived day-to-day. Wenger proposed that identities are formed amid the “tension between our investment in the various forms of belonging and our ability to negotiate the meanings that matter in those contexts” (p. 188). This echoes a sociocultural perspective that cognitive development is not simply a matter of enculturation or even appropriation of existing sociocultural resources and practices, but the reconstruction and transformation of those resources and practices in ways that are responsive to both individual and local needs.

In addition, sustainability of the transnational identities depends on critical thinking and intellectual agency, which are in some ways connected with political and economic policies. It takes time and reflection for people to fully experience and understand these stages. In my case, transnational identity started from the language-learning experience, when I felt curious about the language and was motivated by external rewards. The language factor accompanies the learner and the teacher through the whole process, while becoming less salient when learning in general and teaching experiences joined the process of shaping the identity. Cultural and historical factors derived from transnational learning, living, and teaching experiences may exert the most profound and salient effects on the whole process of identity development. Identity development is comprised of transnational identity capitals and triggered by critical thinking. Transnational identity capitals that shape cultural identity are created and accrued through social events and transnational experience.

Critical thinking and intellectual agency then relate to each other. Critical thinking, which is crucial to sustaining a professional identity, is enhanced through continued learning and reflection. However, the activation of the continued learning and reflection depends on the intellectual agency. Regarding teachers, Coldron and



**Figure 1.** A sociocultural model in studying transnational identities.

Smith (1999) stated the importance of agency over social structure and argued that the choices and deliberation that teachers have made may constitute their professional identities.

Ethnicity, the final factor in shaping cultural identity, is closely connected with ideological, political, and racial factors. Moore, Edwards, Halpin, and George (2002) argued that teachers' active location in social space can be undermined by policies or institutions that require conformity, which could marginalize their positionings in that space. Taking a critical stance, I believe scholars and intellectuals should be globalized, unbiased, and unrestricted from international



politics. The completion of a doctoral journey should serve to enhance a scholar's professional identity and enable him/her to contribute to the global academia. A scholar's professional identity development should not be affected or restricted by contextual or political factors.

### **Conclusion: Sustaining Transnational Identity**

The current study offers several implications, both personal and to the creation of policy. First, writing this autoethnography helped me to consider how I may sustain my transnational identity and help teacher education programs. My own authentic experience filled a gap in the existing literature by illustrating that transnational identity development can be used as an analytical tool to advocate for social justice and develop teacher education programs in different international settings (e.g., Carson, 2005; Farnsworth, 2010; Ma and Singer-Gabella, 2011).

In addition, as I began recalling and analyzing my own experiences and going through the literature, I found that the development of a person's identity is truly complex and complicated. In some way, the development can be staged. It resembles a person from childhood to adolescence and then from adolescence to adulthood. However, when the development reaches a stage where a person's critical thinking and agency has been saturated, the development then becomes recurring, recycling previous stages. It is also extremely complex and challenging when a person is a transnational, biracial critical thinker. However, this kind of complexity and challenges also provides scholars and researchers with more to explore in the future.

Finally, this paper argued that as determinants of transnational intellectuals' location and mobility, political and economic factors affect transnational intellectual identities and can restrict their professional and cultural identities. From a democratic perspective, human capital accrued from transnational experiences should contribute to global academia as a whole, instead of being restricted to any sending or receiving countries.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of interest** The author and corresponding author state that there is no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- 1 *US–China trade war*: the ongoing economic conflict between the USA and China based on concerns about Chinese trade surplus, illegal technological acquisitions, national security. It has resulted in tariffs under the current US administration (Liu and Woo, 2018).
- 2 *One Belt One Road initiative*: the creation of a highly integrated, cooperative, and mutually beneficial set of maritime and land-based economic corridors linking European and Asian markets (Swaine, 2015).

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