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**International student subjectivities: biographical investments for liquid times.**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The international student as an object of study has typically been understood through the frame of cultural identity, mapped back to notions of fixed, static notions of cultural difference. In contrast, this study seeks to understand how the practice of international study has emerged as an increasingly popular 'biographical solution' (Beck 1992, Bauman 2002) in order to pursue imagined career trajectories in a globalised and competitive world. Informed by recent studies of middle class strategy in Asia (Pinches, 1999) and the transnational Chinese diaspora (Ong 1999, Ang 2001) that challenge essentialist accounts of timeless Asian values and East-West binaries, the paper analyses interview data collected from 'Asian' international students attending preparatory programs at an Australian university. Specifically, the paper discusses the disciplinary formation of the 'international student' – the take-up of self-Orientalizing discourses (Ong, 1999), and engagement in practices of auto-ethnography (Pratt, 1998). In addition, the paper explores students' critiques of, and resistances to Orientalist discourses, and pragmatic willingness to submit to local demands to further their longer term goals. Preparatory programs emerge not so much as life-changing locations but rather necessary transit lounges, for the acquisition of cultural distinctions along their life routes.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Australian higher education sector, approximately 23% of the total student population are now full-fee paying international students, typically of Chinese heritage from South East Asia (Department of Education, 2003, 2005; Nesdale, 1995). Despite this sizeable shift in its constituency, the sector continues to offer 'conversion-kit' preparatory courses to allay 'culture shock' for the newly arrived students (see Doherty & Singh, 2005; Singh & Doherty, 2004). These programs coach the international students in an idealized script of a 'pure' Western pedagogy professing high oral participation and 'critical' engagement. We are not denying that this discourse of 'cultural difference' has been productive, and indeed profitable, for the sector. Its resilience in the face of global changes to the way and degree to which people of different linguistic, cultural and national backgrounds now interact is in itself remarkable. Rather, we are suggesting that it is time to revisit its basic conceptual premises and test their relevance under current conditions.

With particular reference to the 'Asian' student, critiques of the long standing '**Asian learner**' discourse are growing (Biggs, 1997; Chan, 1999; Dooley, 2003; Kettle, 2005; Kubota, 1999, 2001; Nichols, 2003). For example, Kubota (2001) critiques the Othering discursive practices of cultural difference theory which essentialize the practices of ESL/EFL learners and classrooms and constructs an unproblematic self for BANA (British, Australian, North American) teachers and classrooms. Similarly, Palfreyman (2005) describes a variety of Othering practices evident in the relations amongst Western expatriate teachers/administrators, Turkish teachers and students within a EAP program in a private Turkish university. Othering is defined as 'the ways in which the discourse of a particular group defines other groups in opposition to itself: an Us and Them view that constructs an identity for the Other and, implicitly, for the Self' (Palfreyman, 2005, p.216). Despite their growing number, these critiques have yet to impact on institutional TESOL and higher education practices which continue to Orientalize international students (Bullen & Kenway, 2003) as passive, reproductive learners who need preparatory programs to induct them into the classroom practices of the Western academy (see for example Ballard & Clanchy, 1997). Orientalism as a discourse serves a double function – it describes a geographic distinction (Orient and Occident) and 'expresses a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world' (Said, 1995: 12). Orientalism is thus produced, and exists in, an uneven exchange with various kinds of power – political, intellectual, cultural and moral (Said, 1995).

While the preceding literature has critiqued the Othering and Orientalizing practices of TESOL, our own research work has examined the performative aspects of TESOL discourses – the ways in which the curriculum is designed to couch students in a script of the polarized binary of West vs East learning styles, which must be negotiated before gaining access to higher/advanced studies (Doherty & Singh, 2005). This script offers the students and teachers limited positions from which to speak, to construct their needs and to be heard. In previous work we have shown how static notions of discrete, 'pure', or 'authentic' cultures and their associated 'traditional' learning styles continue to inform much curricular and pedagogic design of internationalized higher education in Australia. In our albeit limited study, we found no significant uptake of alternative discourses that could potentially construct cultural identities that are perhaps more congruent with the network of increasingly intersecting global educational routes (Doherty, 2001; Doherty & Singh, 2005; Singh & Doherty, 2004). Rather, the 'cultural difference' discourse continues to dominate, with little acknowledgment of the wider context of changing cultural conditions and the accelerating 'mutual entanglements' (Ang, 2001, p.87) of globalizing times.

This macro lens helps to understand how institutional categories and conventional practice in TESOL programs are embedded in and sustained by larger cultural and political processes. On the other hand, such a macro lens makes it difficult to see how the individual can fruitfully

navigate their lifeworlds across and within such discourses, using strategies of both compliance or resistance as fits their purpose.

In this paper, we offer an alternative look at the social context that sustains the flow of international students, and a different frame with which to understand the motivations and experiences of the mobile student. We suggest that much of the literature critiquing the discursive constructions of TESOL students is focused on the practices of Western TESOL practitioners. In Said's (1995) terms this literature is more about the discursive power tactics of the Occident and the ways it attempts to describe and constitute the Orientalized Other. However, this literature does not account for the discursive power strategies of Asian international students. Ironically, then, many of the studies do not focus on what the students themselves have to say about their educational routes. Specifically, much of the literature does not account for the ways in which Asian identities may be constructed in relation to Asian modernities and Asian diaspora spaces (Brah, 1996). From this perspective, the Orientalizing strategies of TESOL practitioners may be relatively inconsequential to the learner identities of Asian international students. Rather, these learners may strategically take up essentialist positions of the Asian student (Spivak, 1990) in order to appropriate the educational capital of Western credentials and English language proficiency. The few studies that have attempted to analyse the interview discourses of Asian students (Kenway & Bullen, 2003; Kettle, 2005; Rizvi, 2000) present a counter-discourse to the Orientalizing discursive regime. Kettle's study reports how one international student strategically engages with a multiplicity of operative discourses to negotiate his positioning in the context and constraints of international education. Similarly, Rizvi argues that Asian international students talk of a 'global imagination in which the notions of mobility, transculturalism, and diaspora are especially significant' (p.222). Kenway and Bullen describe the tactics of pragmatism, resistance, ambivalence, reinvention, affirmation and solidarity reported by their sample of international women postgraduate students. These studies construct very different accounts of who the 'Asian' or international learner might be, and how they might be known.

Our study builds on this work, firstly by offering different conceptual tools more suitable to social conditions in current times, and secondly, by analyzing interview data collected from Asian international students enrolled in preparatory TESOL programs in one Australian university. A selection of these interview accounts are analysed to demonstrate how these students carefully negotiate the contradictions between living in globalizing times, their investments in diverse cultural capitals, and the restrictive cultured subjectivities allowed them in the internationalised university. The conclusion reflects on how our pedagogical categories, though well-intentioned, can be constraining for these global souls (Iyer, 2000).

### **The Bigger Picture of Liquid Modernity**

A number of theorisations of the social changes underway argue that the old logic of stable identities is no longer tenable (Appadurai, 2000; Bauman, 2000; Castells, 1996; Giddens, 1990, 1999). In contrast to the relative stability of the old 'solid' containers (Bauman, 2000) of nation, class and ethnicity and the inherited 'givens' of life from these allocated positions, these theorists argue that the new affordances of instantaneous communication, global travel, electronic finance, and mobile capital have produced a new, more flexible or fluid social condition. Bauman (2000) terms this condition 'liquid modernity', extending the 'liquid' metaphor to characterize the 'melting' of previously 'solid' bonds of collective identity (understood through macro theory), into the less determined, more vicarious forms of 'individually conducted life policies' (p.6) (understood through micro strategy). As Giddens (1999, p.65) puts it: 'Self-identity has to be created and recreated on a more active basis than before'. Beck similarly highlights the increasing 'individualization' of 'life situations and biographical patterns' (Beck, 1992, p.128), as the individual engages with institutional offerings, such as employment and educational opportunities, to assemble a life through strategic decisions and risk-taking:

‘Decisions on education, profession, job, place of residence, spouse, number of children and so forth, with all the secondary decisions implied, no longer can be, they must be made ... This means that through institutional and biographical prescriptions, *construction kits of biographical combination possibilities* come into being’ (p. 135, original emphasis).

Beck points out the contradictions across ‘institutional biographical patterns’, for example women trying to fulfil contradictory demands of both family roles and employment, and suggests that ‘how one lives becomes the *biographical solution of systemic contradictions*’ (p.137, original emphasis).

In this frame, the international student’s route through ‘global’ or ‘internationalised’ educational institutions can be understood as a biographical solution to the systemic contradictions between a globalising economy, the dominance of English as a global language, and localized educational opportunities. It has become such a popular solution that the flow of students has accreted its own institutional ‘*construction kits of biographical combination possibilities*’, in terms of standardized ‘preparatory’ pathways for entry into the Western university. The individual is thus channeled into pre-fabricated pathways, designed around notional averages (the ‘institutional abstraction’ (Apple, 2004, p.126) of ‘the international student’), offering a better or worse fit for each individual undertaking the experience. However, it may well suit the individual to temporarily submit to this channeling to ultimately serve their longer term design.

Where does this stream of theory leave pedagogical theory that builds from a foundational concept of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural identity’? In short, social change may well have outstripped our conceptual tools to understand it:

The remoteness and unreachability of systemic structure, coupled with the unstructured, fluid state of the immediate setting of life-politics, change that condition in a radical way and call for a rethinking of old concepts that used to frame its narratives. Like zombies, such concepts are today simultaneously dead and alive. (Bauman, 2000, p.8)

Thus, while the concept ‘culture’ is alive, well and thinkable in the dominant discourse of internationalized higher education, its influence could be dead or fast fading in determining how individuals plot their careers within global flows of finance, ideology, migration and opportunity. Appadurai (1996) suggests that ‘culture’, the concept, remains alive as a discursive ploy: ‘a pervasive dimension of human discourse that exploits difference to generate diverse conceptions of group identity’ (p. 13), but he warns that it should no longer be unproblematically used to refer to ‘a property of individuals and groups’ (p.13). To invoke nostalgic determinist versions of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural difference’ in order to understand the mobile student at the expense of any alternative frame, is to make a fetish of such difference and to elide the proactive agency and global imagination of these students (Rizvi, 2000), and their biographical solutions to living in uncertain, liquid times.

## **Alternative Imaginings of the Asian Learner**

### ***Investments***

As a more cognate or flexible way to think about the re-territorialised learner, Norton (2000) highlights the role of ‘**investments**’ by the cross-cultural language learner, in furthering identity-shaping processes across time and space towards future goals. Norton extends Bourdieu’s notion of different types of capital, to derive this metaphor of ‘investment’:

If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment - a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources ... Thus an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space. (p.10)

Through her ethnography of a group of language learners negotiating their class, gender and linguistic positioning as newly arrived immigrants in Canada, she demonstrates how identities are not given, essential and fixed, but rather, are constituted in a context's particular configuration of power relations and the parties' investments in those particular relationships. McKay and Wong (1996) pursue this concept of investment in language learning in their ethnographic study of the multiple identities immigrant students pursue as they are positioned by and engage with a variety of discourses operating within the school community. They show how the students selectively invested in different aspects of language learning through strategies of 'accommodation' or 'resistance'. Their study discredits the 'generic, ahistorical "stick figure" of the learner' (p. 603) to paint a much more complex picture of the interplay between operative discourses and the individual's strategic agency to pursue their investments while conducting 'delicate social negotiations to fashion viable identities' (p.603).

For our purposes, these studies highlight firstly, the importance of educational careers in 'the process of becoming' (Hall 1996, p.3), that is, identity processes. Educational choices thus constitute biographical solutions, active choices to invest time, money and effort in the hope of realizing imagined futures and new identities. Secondly, these studies demonstrate the complexity of articulating identity projects with the institutional subjectivities on offer, and the multiple fronts on which students must construct their identities.

### ***Transnational or Diasporic Identities***

Similarly, the concept of '**transnational**' identities forged in the opportunities of 'flexible accumulation' in global markets and the mobility of globalised times (Nonini, 1997; Nonini & Ong, 1997; Ong, 1997; Ong & Nonini, 1997) offers an alternative to the increasingly obsolete and restrictive categories of fixed cultural identities reliant on national boundaries or ethnic histories. Transnational identities have outgrown any national boundaries, but can skillfully negotiate the respective 'zones of graduated sovereignty' (Ong, 1997). In their body of work, Ong and Nonini build on Clifford's notion of cultural routes and culture in travel to account for the Chinese diaspora's strategic engagement both within and beyond various capitalist, family and national regimes to pursue 'transnational imaginaries' (Ong, 1997, p.172). Identity in these conditions is not a static inherited quality, but 'formed out of the strategies for the accumulation of economic, social, cultural and educational capital as diasporic Chinese travel, settle down, invest in local spaces, and evade state disciplining in multiple sites' (Ong & Nonini, 1997, p.326). Avtar Brah (1996) defines diasporic identities as being simultaneously local and global. Diasporic identities are 'networks of transnational identifications encompassing "imagined" and "encountered" communities' (Brah, 1996, p.196):

... diasporas emerge out of migrations of collectivities, whether or not members of the collectivity travel as individuals, as households or in various other combinations. Diasporas are places of long-term, if not permanent, community formations, even if some households or members move on elsewhere. The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation ... But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure (Brah, 1996, p.193)

### ***Asian Middle-Class Strategies: Strategic Essentialism and Western Consumption***

In cognate work, Pinches (1999) reviews the cultural politics surrounding the newly emergent Asian capitalist class, 'as they are variously constructed by themselves and by others, through ethnic stereotyping, lifestyle and consumption patterns, interpersonal conduct, moral judgements, and nationalist or class ideologies' (p. xi). Against a backdrop of rapid economic and cultural change, Pinches explores the rhetorical tension between different accounts of the middle classes' economic success – on the one hand attributed to 'traditional Oriental values', while on the other hand equally attributed to the rampant spread of Western consumerism. Pinches argues that this irreconcilable binary overlooks their relational nexus:

Each of these representations of the new rich in Asia needs to be understood in reference to both the global and the local, and, most significantly, the interplay between them. .... Indeed, it is this interplay, mediated through the unprecedented movement across state borders of people, capital, consumer goods, fashion and lifestyle images, and contending politico-religious ideologies, that underpins the heightening of both cosmopolitanism, and ethnic or nationalist differentiation in Asia' (p. 10).

Pinches also highlights the importance of educational credentials as status markers, and the pursuit of such as a significant strategy to achieve the less tangible cultural capital associated with social refinement. For Pinches, these strategies (that sustain much of the flow of international students into Australia) are not fixed cultural traits, but newly acquired tactics (that is, biographical solutions) arising from significant cultural and economic change.

**Auto-ethnography** is an example of a strategy used in the projection of transnational or diasporic student identities. By 'auto-ethnography' we imply

a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. ... autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with those (ethnographic) texts. ... they involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror. These are merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding. (Pratt, 1998, p.175)

As one strategy of auto-ethnography, the term '**self-orientalization**' has been coined by Ong (1997) to highlight the opportunistic take-up of triumphal Orientalism by Chinese diaspora capitalists and Asian leaders to produce transnational solidarity. Ong argues that such self-orientalizing is a strategic discursive response to certain settings, deployed by the transnational capitalist to further their ends opportunistically, rather than a claim to some intrinsic cultural truth. Similarly, Spivak (1996) uses the term 'strategic use of essentialism' to signal two ways of representation – representation as delegation in the political sense, and representation as portrait or depiction (see also Singh & Dooley, 2001). Crucially, Spivak (1996: 109) suggests that it is 'not possible to be non-essentialist'. Consequently, academic debates about the dangers of essentialism and the need for anti-essentialism are unproductive. Rather, Spivak (1996) suggests that we should think about the ways in which individuals represent themselves (depict, portray), and in the process represent members of particular social groups (delegation). In other words, it is important to engage in the cultural politics of representation – who is being represented, where, how, when, and for what tactical or strategic ends?

These studies of 'investments', 'transnationalism', diasporic identity, 'middle class strategy' and representation strategies argue for a more multi-faceted concept of identity that fractures any overriding ascription of cultural identity with considerations of class positioning and family/gender regimes, and their interplay – all notable silences in the institutional

abstraction of the 'international student' in Australian higher education. Thus from a variety of fronts, we arrive at the realization that identities (or cultures) are not fixed, or ascribed by membership in collectivities, but are rather work-in-progress, meshing the positions and resources on offer in dialogue with the biographical solutions of the individual.

## **THE EMPIRICAL STUDY**

To empirically investigate how these **more liquid life-politics** are played out through a common strategy of international education, we conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with groups of 2-3 students studying in EAP or academic preparation courses at an Australian university. These interviews constituted one part of a larger study<sup>i</sup> into the curriculum and pedagogy designed for international students involving video-taping sequences of classes, and teacher interviews with stimulated recall accounts of episodes in their teaching. For this paper, interviews involving the 36 students attending a Foundation course have been analysed.<sup>ii</sup> Of these 36 students, 4 were not from Asian nations (2 South America, 1 Europe, 1 from Africa). The remainder, whose comments will form the focus of this study of Asian identities, were from Taiwan (8), Hong Kong (6), Singapore (4), Indonesia (4), Japan (2), and individuals from East Timor, India, Korea, Malaysia, Philipines, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, and one whose nationality was not stated.

When analysing the interview scripts, we are interested in achieving a double vision of perceiving both student identities-in-the-making and their positioning by, or voicing of, the subjectivities offered in their particular educational setting. For the former, we are interested in identifying the investments each individual has made in order to accrue the linguistic and/or cultural capital on offer (for example, English language competence, Western educational qualifications), and what it means to them and their life chances. For the latter, we are interested in how they take up, display or own the cultured identities constructed for them as 'international students', understanding 'culture' here as a discursive ploy (Appadurai 1996).

Thus, in our analysis<sup>iii</sup> of these interview accounts, we are interested in firstly, what investments the students are making, with what purpose in mind; secondly; how an 'Orientalizing' discourse may be invoked by the international students. We cannot erase the possibility that the interview setting and the framing of the questions contributed to the 'cultured' positioning of the student. Our purpose here, however, is to show how the students negotiate the cultural politics of such discursive positioning to account for their motivations and experience.

## **ANALYSING SELF REPORTS**

### **1. Investing in Western cultural capital and English language competence**

In the students' accounts, it was difficult to analytically separate their quest for a 'Western' education from their quest for English language competence. The latter is necessary for the former if undertaking studies in Australia, but is acknowledged by the students to be a valuable commodity in itself, and could be considered as adding value to their investment strategies: '*... seeing as English is an international language.*', '*Yes, I can get the degree, can get a knowledge, also I can get English language with me.*' Thus in terms of investments, the quest for English language competence temporally precedes, then can be conflated with, the 'Western' higher education qualification. This conflation was reflected in the Foundation program for international students which offered disciplinary prerequisites with a strong language development focus. It served as a reception point for both English as second language (ESL) students and students whose first language was English, as well as students whose schooling was totally in English (for example, students from India, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea and Singapore).

By their accounts, the ESL students had already made long term investments in pursuing English language competence as a biographical strategy prior to their arrival in Australia. Many students report '6 or 7 years' of effort to develop their English language proficiency, some much longer: *'since at kindergarten'*. This personal investment is matched by the significant investment made by their schooling systems, with English language courses offered in junior and senior secondary, sometimes earlier, and English competence exams required for university entrance in some settings. This formal systemic investment was reportedly often supplemented by the individual with private tuition, or their own informal effort; *'...English is very important so even though when I studying degree we have no English subject but I still studied by my own like listen to the program but still not that good because not opportunity to speak'*.

This sustained investment should be understood to be an expensive and arduous commitment. One student reported having already spent 2 years in preparatory English classes at the Australian university. Others could be considered early investors, with 5 of the 36 students taking 3 to 5 years of their high schooling in Australia: *'... so that's why students start early. It's a good advantage for them'*. That such students were still required to undertake a preparatory program casts a shadow over that particular investment strategy.

The students often reported poor returns from much of their schooling investment in English, with frequent complaints about the limited competence gained in such programs: *'... but we start on the basic English, like A, B, C the alphabet and we never speak English in school and that is quite difficult for us to learn how to speak ...'* On the other hand, some students also voiced frustration with their preparatory studies in Australia, given the limited opportunity to mix with native English speakers and their separation from the 'real' university practices: *'... I feel like because we are learning English and we need to be able to use it to speak and to listen to someone speaking in English. I don't feel like if we have more time to participate in real situation like, say, being given some changes just to go into a lecture hall you know like there were 300 students and sit there and just listen and see how people are participating.'* These interviews did not sample students who had decided to cut their losses and return home without realising their investment. Others however, such as the dissatisfied customer quoted, seemed prepared to undergo the required program, in order to serve their longer term plans: *'I just want to get it over with.'*

In terms of their capital investment, many students suggested that Australian university places were relatively cheap and close by, offering good value for money: *'Yeah, if I studied in America it's going to be double the price.'* In addition, Australian university places were sought for specialised offerings not available in the home country, and with regard to a general perception of better quality. Such quality claims were represented in some accounts as reflecting inherent qualities, such as the currency of the course content, the technology facilities and its *'open mind of thinking'* for postgraduate studies. For others, it was more a matter of quality measured by 'brand power' or symbolic capital, in terms of future employer perceptions: *'... and I also chose to study here because I think people back home and even the companies back home would like to receive employees with an English background or something like that ...'* Ironically, such accounts were produced alongside others that reported easier entry into higher education in Australia, due to the extreme competition for limited local places: *'and it's near and it's easy to get it. I mean if I try to study in Indonesia it's really difficult because we have a test to enter the uni and it's very difficult'*. Thus, international study emerges as a second option, a fall back tactic: *'I think that it's actually an alternative to my local uni. Maybe that's when I didn't get in so I sought opportunities ....'*

What did the cultural capital of English language competence and 'Western' credentials mean to these students and their life chances? Students often referred to the value English language competence would accrue for their employment prospects: *'Because all the job in Hong Kong*



*English is important there for all the job in Hong Kong.* The 'inner circle' (Kachru, 1996) status of Australian English also meant that students from 'outer circle' settings aimed to acquire the privileged dialect of the Centre: *'So one of the reasons I came here because I wanted to speak proper English as well.'* A higher education qualification also carried its own meaning/value, which made its pursuit overseas necessary if local opportunities were limited: *'... so the only way I can get out is to study in other country'*. However, the 'West' branded qualification was also considered to carry a certain symbolic capital in its perceived distinction over local qualifications: *'It's more, it's high in prestige. Yeah, you can get jobs more easily.'* In addition, students mentioned broader biographical agendas informing their mobility, such as participating in an internationalised community, learning languages in general, gaining independence, and pursuing their academic interests in specialised disciplines.

Another pattern that emerged in the students' interview accounts of their investment strategies was the frequent mention of established family routes that made their study in this Australian university a routine biographical solution, as they follow in the footsteps of siblings, relatives or friends: *'It goes like we have relative and apparently like she study in (university) and she make it and she study in (town) and also my younger sister and then my turn ...'* The presence of relatives or family friends studying at the university, or more generally in Australia, was cited by 14 of the 36 students in this sample as factors precipitating their choice of location or institution. Their presence was associated with addressing safety concerns, being 'looked after', and recommendations of the selected institution. Fathers in particular featured as influential in the decisions leading to students' enrolment: *'My Dad chose it for me ... I don't have any interest in English.... My Dad chose it. ... He thinks it's better to study abroad instead of studying in my home country.'* This patterning supports Ong's thesis (Ong, 1999) of the disciplinary structure of the Chinese diasporic family regime, and the patriarch's transnational strategies played out through the relocation of children to further familial and business opportunities.

Significantly, one student expressed an interest in gaining permanent residency in Australia. One other aimed for an international career, but the vast majority constructed their routes as circuits, leading back to their nation of origin. This pattern can be read two ways with regard to the moral panic historically associated with the risk of illegal or 'backdoor' migration into Australia by international students (Nesdale, 1995). Firstly, the students may have strategically chosen not to make such plans public and chose to represent their motivations in the legitimated discourse compatible with temporary study visas; or secondly, the imagined 'risk' is overstated, and Australia overestimates its attractiveness to this mobile population.

To summarise this section, the first analysis has purposefully employed a metaphor of 'investment' following Norton (2000) to describe the biographical solutions made by the students from Asian nations to plot career trajectories in a global field of educational opportunities. Their long term investments to gain English, as both an end in itself and as the gatekeeper to the cultural capital of a Western qualification, demonstrate how embedded such a global imaginary is in these echelons of Asian societies. Their imagined life-worlds are not adequately contained within local or traditional cultural scripts. English is in their world (Pennycook, 1995), for better and for worse, and its acquisition is now becoming a routine aspect of preparation for local employment markets. Their goal to acquire English competence demonstrates a transnational imaginary driving transnational investments to appropriate the resources of one national setting and deploy them advantageously in another. Their shared biographical solution of international higher education solves the institutional contradictions between: limited local higher education opportunities; professional aspirations; a world that increasingly privileges dominant forms of English as its lingua franca; and local economies that are dependent on global flows. Though their strategies involve long term risky investments, these students have pursued an enterprising solution to circumvent their restricted local opportunities, and capitalise on global markets in order to engage with global

flows of knowledge and economic opportunity. Their sojourn in Australia emerges not so much as their ultimate goal, but more as a stopover en route. National boundaries are immaterial to those with the necessary economic resources, which allow them to circumvent local strictures on higher education opportunities and access other nation's systems, albeit by playing by those rules temporarily. A cultural identity no longer adequately represents these variegated interests.

## **2. Fulfilling the orthodox script - the self-Orientalising account**

This second aspect of the analysis sought to identify where and how students took up the orthodox discourse of 'cultural difference' that, we have argued, informs much of the institutional response to their presence, and constructed an 'East' vs 'West' binary in their accounts. Such accounts were understood to indicate how students can take up the cultured positions offered by this discourse, and Orientalize the Asian student or Asian practices, while valorizing the Western parallel construct.

In general, the majority of students from Asian nations slipped easily into this orthodox framing. The majority of such self-Orientalizing accounts referred to different educational practices, precipitated by the question, 'Is the teaching here the same as the teaching in your home country?', or similar wording. The recurrent difference constructed was in regard to the regulative order of classroom interaction – high in oral participation with more parity between students and teachers in the West, while teacher-dominated with a markedly higher status for the teacher in the East: *'Maybe in Australia the teachers always will ask you to talking and then make sure enforcing the class but in Hong Kong it's just all the time the teacher's talking and you're supposed not to talking and just listening.'* Related to these aspects, is the difference reported in the desired relationships to curricular knowledge: *'Um – I think my country and I think most Asians the education style is input... You know like Western country like Australia is output.'* It is significant that in some accounts of contrasted pedagogies, the students often express self-criticism and an inherited sense of the 'East' needing fixing: *'... the style and the interacting between the lecturers and the students because in Singapore I think they are not open enough, we are not open up enough to actually like raise question across during lectures ... but I think of here you're actually encouraging that.'* Other accounts couch the differences in more relative terms of temporary contextual adjustments to be made, *'and adapt to the system'*.

Students also drew contrasts between the East and the West in regard to the wider social sphere, including family relations, censorship, fashion, recreation, religion and work ethic. However, most students limited their claims to *'in my country'*, and carefully resisted making broader claims regarding pan-Asian attributes.

Self-Orientalizing for Ong, was understood to be a proactive strategy employed by transnational capitalists to shore up their identities, alliances and relationships of solidarity within the Chinese diaspora. It was designed to recapture community, a triumphal celebration of their difference, a strategic use of essentialism. This is, as Spivak (1996) and Brah (1996) argue a pro-active use of essentialism, albeit with Asian familial/patriarchal overtones of forging transnational alliances (see also Luke, 2001). The same could not be said of these interview accounts whereby the students are disciplined by the Orientalist discourse which underpins their preparatory programs. In such cases, essentialism is used to depict or portray Asian students as the negative, passive Other. At the same time, the Western teacher is represented as the pedagogic redeemer. As we argued previously, it is crucial to analyse the cultural politics of representation, and in particular how essentialism is deployed for particular strategic or tactical ends.

## **CONCLUSION**

Who is this 'new' student within the Australian university system? And how do we (academic, general, administrative staff) 'know' this student? In this paper, we analysed interview data from international students (predominantly with an Asian Chinese heritage) studying in foundation preparatory programs in an Australian university. Our interview questions were designed to get at: (1) students' explanations for studying in Australia; (2) the investments made in acquiring English language proficiency and Western credentials; (3) perceived differences between Australian and home education systems/pedagogies; and (4) accounts of Asian and Western values.

We drew on three theoretical concepts to analyse these interview accounts, namely: (1) investments; (2) transnational identities, in particular the Asian diaspora; (3) auto-ethnography being the strategic use of essentialism for developing alliances and navigating terrains of cultural politics. Following McKay and Wong (1996) and Norton (2000) we suggest that Asian international students make heavy investments in acquiring English proficiency as a form of symbolic or cultural capital which can be exchanged for improved work opportunities in the transnational and local labour market. For a large number of the students, many years were spent acquiring English language skills in the home country and in Australia. For many students, Australian universities were worthy of further capital outlay – time, money – in order to acquire English language skills and Western credentials. Australian universities were not only considered less expensive than US and UK universities, but geographically closer to home, and part of the growing Asian diaspora.<sup>iv</sup> Other family members had often studied or were presently studying in Australian universities, and the choice of an Australian university at times made by the patriarch of the family to extend the network of transnational familial alliances. Students' goals to acquire English competence and Western credentials demonstrates not only their own, but their family's transnational imaginary driving investments in Asian diasporic spaces – spaces that cross national boundaries. The students' shared biographical solution of investment in international higher education attempts to manage the contradictions between: limited local opportunities in the field of higher education; professional aspirations; recognition of English as the global lingua franca; knowledge of the way local economies are connected to global economic flows; and alliances in a global Asian diaspora often mediated by familial and patriarchal ties.

In their own accounts, the students strategically deployed essentialist notions of Asian values, specifically in terms of family relations, censorship, fashion codes, recreation and religious and work ethics. We theorized such tactics as navigational strategies in the discursive terrain of cultural politics. In other words, the students could not take up non-essentialist or anti-essentialist positions – there is no such space of possibility. Consequently, they took up two aspects of essentialist discourses – representation as portrait or depiction, and representation as political or strategic delegation on behalf of a group, collective, familial alliance. In terms of representation as depiction – the students appropriated notions of family obligations, family investments in education, and family honor to portray Asian identities/cultures in relation to Western identities/cultures. In terms of representation as delegation – the students were called on to represent their home nation, education system, family ties and so forth as ambassadors in a foreign country. As guests/visitors in Australia, albeit full-fee paying visitors, they were also not in a position to critique their educational experiences. They had chosen to invest in the Australian higher education system because of limited opportunities elsewhere – they had to make good of this investment.

Our analysis is consistent with that offered by writers in the field of international education who contest the retro images of Asian students as passive, rote learners (see for example, Dooley, 2003; Bullen & Kenway, 2003; Kettle, 2005; & Rizvi, 2000). We suggest that images of Asian international students need to keep up with the changing global times of liquid modernity – in which all people are expected to fashion biographical solutions as tradition increasingly loses its hold.

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<sup>ii</sup> Interview schedule: (1) Why did you choose to study English in Australia? (2) How long have you been learning English? What do you think that you are best at in English and what do you find most difficult? (3) Is the teaching here the same as the teaching in your home country? How is it the same? How is it different? (4) Is the English you're using here different from the English you were using at home? (5) Can you tell me about something in the course that you really liked? Was there something you didn't like? How could it be made better? (6) Do you think we can talk about such a thing as 'Asian Values' and 'Western Values'? Can you tell me about this? (7) What did you want to get from this program? Do you think that you got it?

<sup>iii</sup> The analytic questions asked of the interview accounts were: (1) What investments has this student made? (2) What does the education capital (language, credentials) mean to them and their life chances? (3) How do they take up the cultured identities offered?

<sup>iv</sup> Since the abolition of the White Australia Policy in the late 1960s, and the growth in full-fee paying international students in the onshore and offshore Australian higher education sector since the Dawkins' reforms of the late 1980s. Indeed, recent trade agreements between Australia and China have involved not only the export of raw materials (coking coal and iron ore) which 'are feeding the Chinese economic miracle' (Editorial, 2005, p.15) but also the sale of higher education services and places.

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