

## Where is home?

Many of the people close to my heart are transnationals such as myself. Belonging is a frequently discussed topic in my circles, and often a topic that is surrounded by considerable angst. Where do we belong? Is it really worth it? What were we thinking when we were young adult students making our first international move which has propelled our international careers since and put us on a trajectory where home, at least in the singular, simply doesn't exist?

These reflections are not unique to me and my circle of friends as I've just discovered when I read Youna Kim's article about "Asian women on the move" (and, yes, the title was a major part of the attraction). Many of the interview excerpts with Chinese, Korean and Japanese women living in London sounded as if it was me and my friends talking.

All these women come from quite privileged and educated backgrounds and one of their key motivations to move to London had been to further their education and to free themselves from the traditional constraints imposed on women back home, including the imperative to marry. When they spoke about the reasons for their move they included the Western media who they had used frequently back home and which had instilled a hope for self-transformation in them. Regular readers of [Language-on-the-Move](#) will know that this is also something Kimie Takahashi and I have found in our research with Japanese women studying in Australia (see, for instance, [here](#) and [here](#)).

However, additionally, Kim found that, once they had left home and moved to London, the women's patterns of media consumption changed drastically. They lost interest in the Western media that had motivated them in the first place and started to use ethnic media. The reason for that change was not nostalgia, as one might expect, but rather an acute sense of exclusion, as expressed in these quotes:

In the first year I watched television to know this society. Now [after three years] don't watch. The more I watch, the more I feel alienated.... There's no connection. It's too British. I liked the British accent before because it sounded posh, but now that accent feels alienating too. (Korean woman in London; p. 139)

No quality food, no caring for others' feelings.... I stop fighting because it was my choice to move here, because my English is not good enough. I cannot even express frustration to outsiders as they say, 'You live in attractive London!' My friend depressed in Paris hears the same, 'You live in beautiful Paris!' (Japanese woman in London; p. 142)

I feel like a woman warrior of China. I feel the wall, whether that is racism, invisible hostility, coldness, or superiority in culture.... I am becoming more Chinese while living abroad. This feeling grows. (Chinese woman in London; p. 148)

One of the reasons for the boom in international education in general and for language study-abroad in particular is that study abroad and the proficiency in English it is supposed to confer are frequently touted as the high road to social inclusion, with social inclusion being defined as economic success and career advancement. However, as these women have found, this imagined form of aspirational social inclusion comes at the cost of

actually being social excluded in a mundane, every-day sense. Transnational migrants often lose their connections with home or see real connections transformed into virtual connections. At the same time, they don't find a way into the host society in a mundane sense, either: Kim's interviewees speak about domestic discomforts ("no quality food"), their overall disappointment with (to them) surprisingly low levels of quality of life or the sense of marginalization that comes with not being able to share a joke. Above all, they trace their sense of exclusion back to linguistic difficulties: routine encounters become daily reminders that they are different and that they don't belong.

Kim's research is evidence of a perpetual dialectic that is at the heart of the intersection between language and social inclusion: while language learning and international education hold the promise of social inclusion as economic advancement, in everyday life they actually serve to marginalize and exclude (even relatively privileged) transnational migrants from a sense of home. Maybe that's another explanation [why Japanese students, at least, have started to choose home over learning English abroad](#).



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