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Discursive formation of personalities: life trajectories of a transnational doctoral student between the UK and China

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Abstract: Contributing to existing studies on global circuits of knowledge and labour, this paper presents a case study of Andy – a Chinese doctoral student in the UK – and looks at his transition from higher education to later joining the labour market after returning to China through the lens of personality traits. It draws upon literature on language socialisation and sociolinguistic studies of mobility, focusing on how social actors navigate transnational higher education and the consequences on professional development in a neoliberalising market economy. It aims to investigate how (in)appropriate personhood – as manifested in recurrent personality attributes – is enacted and negotiated in specific learning contexts in Andy’s trajectory and the impact on employability, with various types of data consisting of participant observation, interviews, and relevant materials. The analysis suggests that Andy has been trained to engage communicatively with academic tasks in higher education settings. However, Andy considers himself lacking certain personality variables that could align with the criteria of a “good doctoral student” depicted by the institutions, such as being independent, motivated, and self-disciplined. Andy gradually shows disorientation in an academic career, albeit finding his inadequacy to perform the desired professional personhood in a labour market that values working experience and communication skills over education certification. This process explains why sometimes the expected communicative repertoires and training acquired in higher education are not transferable into valuable resources that Andy can mobilise to become employed. This paper argues that neoliberal rationality has stratifying effects on individuals primarily due to an emphasis on self-responsibility and constant improvements. In transnational higher education, certain personality traits are considered desirable and lacking such characteristics can have side effects on mobile actors like Andy, who navigate the globalising labour market through uncertainty and precarity.

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1 Introduction

In his final year, Andy, a Chinese international doctoral student in engineering at a prestigious university in London, decided to seek job opportunities outside academia. He explained, “Basically, 70 per cent of the doctoral graduates work in academia, and the rest are ... If one does not have the dedication to science and cannot calm down and concentrate, if you don’t have that spirit, it [staying in academia] is almost like torture”. Andy realises that his career orientation is deviant from the expected path for doctoral students. He pauses to think about graduates changing course for other paths, after which he considers certain personality variables (“dedication”, “calm down and concentrate”, and a passionate “spirit”) as fundamental to embarking on an academic career. In contrast, he displayed a pragmatic personality, saying, “I consider profits the foremost. Maybe I am too utilitarian”, albeit he also expressed anxieties about finding satisfactory jobs. Why did Andy come to this dilemma of diverging from academic labour and reporting insecurities in job-hunting outside academia? This paper zooms in on the process involved in “becoming” a professional with specific attention to Andy’s discursive enactment of various personality traits in higher education (HE, hereafter) settings and narrated trajectory that can add insights to the potential tensions and consequences for social actors as they transit from transnational HE to the labour market.

Transnational mobility has generated both widespread interest in the general public and scholarly attention, with various notions emerging around this topic to describe the interconnectedness of multiple spaces of engagement of people, knowledge, and resources – e. g., “scapes”, movements or scales (Appadurai 1990; Blommaert 2005, 2015; Pennycook 2012). This paper directs attention to a specific type of HE mobility inhabited by increasing numbers of Chinese international students going overseas for education with promises of better employment opportunities due to their certifications’ prestige in the globalising labour market (Iannelli and Huang 2014; Ward 2012). Popular destinations are normally those perceived as “English-speaking” countries, a tendency that fuels long-standing colonial structures and the global expansion of Western modernity (Boaventura de Sousa 2014). Over the past two decades, China has become one of the most prominent international student-sending countries. The international education sector of British higher education has successfully captivated Chinese students; indeed, Chinese students constitute the largest portion of overseas students in the UK (HESA 2022). For them, engaging with transnational HE is imbued with the promise of “a successful

return” to China upon graduation (Pérez-Milans and Guo 2021), which is typically associated with the accumulation of perceived cultural and social capital that can be transferred into economic capital later (Bourdieu 1986).

This study sparks from my collaboration in a pilot project, “Becoming a professional in the new global market: Language, mobility and inequality”, carried out at the Institute of Education in 2017 during which I followed three international students in London (each located at a different stage from HE to the labour market). I examined their communication practices in institutional settings such as HE and the workplace. Data analysis suggests that although the participants have mobilised various resources to join the local labour market, they still face contradictions such as (a) the devaluation of perceived elite education due to massification of student enrolment, (b) social hierarchies and lack of training opportunities in the hi-tech industry, and (c) difficulties in fitting into localised cultural practices.

In this paper, I narrow my focus to a specific group of Chinese international students pursuing research degrees in engineering. I present a case study of a focal participant named Andy, from observations of his final year of doctoral study in the UK in 2019, to interviews on his subsequent professional development upon his return to China in 2022. In England, overseas students occupy more than half of full-time postgraduate students in STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering and mathematics (British Council 2015). Indeed, statistical data from the focal university demonstrates that the engineering department has drawn the largest pool of Chinese international students from 2015 to 2020 among all departments. Hence, the experience of Chinese doctoral students can shed light on significant aspects of the making of academic labour in HE institutes as they circulate between China and the UK.

In so doing, I analytically attend to the discursive formation of various personality traits that emerged, consolidated, or shifted out of Andy’s trajectory through an ethnographically informed, critical sociolinguistic lens (Blommaert and Dong 2010; Heller 2011; Heller et al. 2018; Martin-Jones et al. 2012; Pérez-Milans 2013; Rampton 2006). Studies on the overseas experience of Chinese international students and professionals are primarily conducted from the perspectives of intercultural communication, identity formation, or labour migration (e.g., Gu 2015; Le and Gardner 2010; Ye 2018; Yu 2017; Zhou and Worthington 2014). However, existing research lacks attention to the process of becoming a professional, the lived experiences and potential struggles that come with it, how social actors react to the conditions, and how their trajectories enact and reconfigure more significant flows of knowledge and labour.

This paper argues that certain personal qualities are value-laden in HE settings and are considered essential for doctoral students’ academic performance on top of the training and repertoires recognised as emblematic of doing academic work.

In contrast, Andy's enactment of inappropriate traits such as lacking the enthusiasm to do research, a distance towards academia, or laziness can be seen as less morally distinguished, impacting his employability. Blaming his failure to become an academic on personality traits is associated with heightened attention to self-responsibility under neoliberalism (Hall 2014), which erases the immense structural inequality in transnational higher education and the global labour market.

2 Becoming a professional: HE mobility in neoliberalism

The making of a professional documented in this paper is situated within larger flows of knowledge, resources, and labour between China and the UK and was made possible by a wider infrastructure of transnational education within which individuals like Andy move and build social relations. Specifically, transnational HE in the UK can be seen as a “language learning” setting, with language involving both English and a set of discursive and semiotic registers (Agha 2007) that need to be mobilised in specific ways to complete academic tasks appropriately. The ubiquitous use of English in modern society is rooted in linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 2008), with unprecedented impacts on individuals (O'Regan 2014). For instance, the acquisition of the English language and performing an English speakerhood has the potential to index a different or “better” self (Highet 2021), thus serving as “an attitude, a style, a way of being in the world ... a declaration of cosmopolitan subjectivity” (Hall 2014: 264).

Aspirations to perform as a competent English speaker are fueled by the neoliberal market rationality that constantly compels individuals to engage in self-improvement projects and expects the workers to take the initiative for skills upgrading, often resulting in “a constant state of anxiety and insecurity” (Park 2021b: 166). The “imperative to achieve” may cause exhaustion and neuronal illnesses like depression and burnout syndrome, especially when the individual can no longer achieve (Han 2015). These anxieties and fears are rather likely to be seen as “the affective impact of neoliberalism on individual subjectivity” (Yeung and Gray 2023: 613; see also Adam et al. 2005). This research deploys Foucault's (1988) notions of governmentality and “technologies of the self” to consider the influence of neoliberalism on the formation of subjectivities. Under neoliberal forms of governmentality, individuals must invest in self-care, be resilient and become personally responsible in various domains of daily life (Lemke 2001). Individuals must “reflexively and flexibly manage themselves as one owns and manages a

business, tending to one's qualities and traits as owned and even improvable assets" (Gershon 2011: 542). Subjects must also discipline themselves to behave in specific ways for happiness and fulfilment (Inoue 2007).

Moreover, transnational subjects like Andy may frequently confront unpredictability and insecurities in a rapidly reshuffling society (Beck 2002), especially as they move between multiple time-space scales (e.g., Catedral 2018; Park 2017). As such, the individual process of becoming flexible through "responsibilised self-regulation" is the primary regulatory system of contemporary capitalist societies upon individuals (Fraser 2003). Upon completion of HE degrees, Chinese international students' job-seeking experience is rarely satisfactory. On the one hand, staying in host countries such as the UK is attractive due to perceived less stressful working environments, academic freedom, and better quality of life (Benson and O'Reilly 2009). Nevertheless, student migrants' legal status and non-native English-speaking backgrounds may hinder their employability by way of having insufficient contact with local social and professional networks (She and Wotherspoon 2013). This constraint may also bring about the reduced value of their accumulated capital; they tend to find lower-paid jobs compared to their local counterparts with the same educational attainment levels (Ye 2018; Yu 2017).

On the other hand, Chinese students' difficulties in fitting into the labour market in host countries may trigger their return migration informed by recent governmental schemes to attract high-skilled returnees, such as the *hukou* system, a Chinese household registration system based on the calculation of "points" that could foster returnees' upward social mobility within China (Zhang 2018). People with overseas education backgrounds can accumulate valuable points in the credit system when claiming for *hukou* in the most popular metropolitan areas. Despite the government's incentives to attract returnees, the return process is not always smooth, mainly because they may lack sustained interpersonal networks and have inadequate local knowledge of the job market (Hao and Welch 2012). The extent to which their transnational HE can be turned into valuable resources that Chinese international students can mobilise for global employability as they transit from HE to the labour market merits further investigation.

3 Discursive enactment of recurrent personality traits and trajectories

Personality and personality traits have been discussed in relation to language learning, and personality is known as "the psychological qualities that contribute to an individual's enduring and distinctive patterns of feeling, thinking and

behaviours” (Cervone and Pervin 2015: 7, cited in Chen et al. 2022: 853). This paper engages with ideas and discourses of personality and personality traits by looking at the participants’ communication practices in relevant institutional and social settings (the engineering department) and their reflexive accounts of transnational experience to examine how these traits are enacted, consolidated, or shifted through multiple connected series of events.

This paper looks at the enactment and consolidation of personality traits by drawing from the analytical toolkit of stance-taking and trajectories of identification. Specifically, stance is referred to as “a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field” (Du Bois 2007: 163). Stance-taking involves “taking up a position with respect to the form or the content of one’s utterance” (Jaffe 2009: 3). These sets of stance-taking choices (Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009) that can index participant roles or subject positions are sometimes referred to under the rubric of “footing” (Goffman 1971, 1981). In this vein, stance-taking could help exhibit personality traits through “successive alignments and misalignments” (Martín Rojo and Molina 2017: 682). Participants’ personality traits are manifested in the stance-taking acts when they evaluate, position, and (dis)align themselves towards specific ideas, practices and values in relevant institutional settings.

Building upon stance-taking as an entry point for analysis, this paper engages with processes of personality formation as they emerge out of socialisation practices through recurring speech events over time (Wortham and Rhodes 2015). This approach focusing on cross-event pathways can contribute to the explanation of sociolinguistic phenomena focused on an ontogenetic timescale (Wortham 2005). The sociolinguistic inquiry of life trajectories is beneficial to this study because it “privileges the analysis of practices whereby models, ideas and categories about biographies get socially recognised as emblematic of social personae as participants involved negotiate social relations” (Pérez-Milans 2019: 7). Investigation into individuals’ life trajectories could uncover how they (re)configure global flows of knowledge, resources, and labour as well as the consequences that these have on transnational subjects as they move across multiple space-time (see also Garrido and Sabaté-Dalmau 2020). More precisely, I adopt “narrative trajectory” that treats trajectory as “a narrative entextualisation of past, present and future life events and experiences at one specific moment in time” (Flubacher 2020: 33) to unpack Andy’s recounting of his job-seeking experience after returning to China. In this vein, trajectories are reformulated as a narrative practice, serving as fundamental aspects through which individuals’ personhoods emerge in their mobility process.

Stances that recurrently emerge through multiple connected series of events can form social personae or figures of personhood – concrete emblems of (contingent) “publicly perceivable signs such as forms of appearance, behaviour, demeanour, character, and practice” (Agha 2007: 235; see also Agha 2005, 2011). In this paper, I examine the process of personhood formation to capture a range of personality traits that emerged from participants’ trajectories. These meaning-making processes are likely to infer social identities primarily through verbally performing certain social acts and displaying certain stances in a community with shared conventions (Ochs 1993: 288). The analysis of figures of personhood is grounded in the indexicality of language (Blommaert 2010; Silverstein 2003).

As transnational subjects move across various institutions, the normative values and moral evaluations that operate across them impact the classification of social actors’ performance into (in)appropriate personhood. The metapragmatic analysis of figures of personhood simultaneously concerns the interconnectedness of power relations and language use in concrete social circumstances. Sociolinguistic studies have demonstrated how workers are trained to perform their professional personae with specific rhetoric and communicative genres (e.g., Duchêne 2009; Garrido 2017; Kraft 2020; Mankekar and Gupta 2017). For example, employability training programmes not only distinguish between “appropriate and inappropriate ways of feeling, reflecting, and behaving” but also “between desirable and undesirable workers’ personae” (Del Percio 2022: 44). Such analysis of figures of personhoods highlights the way “local practices of evaluation and inter-personal alignment connect with, and fuel, translocal values and beliefs” (Spitzmüller et al. 2021). Therefore, participants’ display of personhoods, as communicatively mediated, is inseparable from embodied social experience embedded in spatial-temporal and affective heuristics (Park 2021a). It can shed light on the subject-formation process with regard to existing and emerging social categories (Irvine and Gal 2000) in specific institutional domains such as HE settings.

4 Research participant and data generation

As a case study that refers to “an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon, set within its real-world context” (Yin 2009: 18), this article explores aspects of the social world by examining the way people participate in, conceive of, and make sense of the world (Heller et al. 2018). Methodologically speaking, the approach to participants’ trajectories as they unfold is in tandem with “ethnographic tracing” (Heller et al. 2018; Heller 2012), focusing on the circulation of people and resources over space and time and how activities persist or evolve. Contradictions

and dilemmas attract particular interests, as participants' coping strategies or resistance to these possible challenges can demonstrate how they navigate experiences and practices in multiple spatiotemporal dimensions with existing and emerging hierarchisation (Garrido and Sabaté-Dalmau 2020).

Born in southern China, Andy went to the UK in 2009 to study at a local high school through a Chinese study abroad agency, after which he obtained a bachelor's degree in engineering at a university in England. He went to London to study for a master's degree and applied for a doctorate. Andy was in his final year when we first met after I contacted a Chinese professor at the focal university. He expressed interest in my project and gladly agreed to participate. I observed Andy a few days a week from summer 2019 to spring 2020, mainly in educational settings such as the department's science lab and student office. Besides, I had many opportunities to interact with Andy's classmates during various social events. The secondary participants accepted my presence naturally as a fellow PhD student, though I tried to minimise the potential disturbance to their activities. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with focal and secondary participants and gathered materials such as Andy's thesis drafts, research logs, and presentation slides. In this paper, I focus on Andy's case and incorporate a few accounts from a secondary participant named Tom, who displayed different personality traits, thus allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of doctoral students' experience. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, Andy returned to China, continued writing his thesis, and began to look for jobs. Throughout the job-seeking process, we kept in touch with an online messaging device, WeChat, and did interviews when Andy shared his difficulties and frustrations in finding a satisfactory job. Next, I turn to how relevant stances emerged and were built around Andy's trajectories.

5 From HE to the labour market: performing (un) desired personality traits

The following sub-sections examine Andy's stance-taking acts with the emergence of three types of personhoods by zooming in on his lived experiences in HE settings and his narrative trajectory. These personhoods are: (1) being a lonely young sojourner in the UK; (2) lacking desirable personality traits (e.g., independent, passionate, and self-disciplined) for academic labour in the institutional domain; and (3) experiencing difficulties in performing the desired personhood in the labour market outside academia.

5.1 “Even after all these years, I still could not blend in”: a lonely Chinese youngster in the UK

Andy shared his experience as a lonely international student when he came to the UK for high school. His father worked in the real estate industry and made this decision because a relative – whose son had studied abroad – persuaded him that education in the UK “is good”. Andy then travelled to the UK and settled at a local high school in southern England in 2009. Andy stated that the decision to study abroad was “random” and made too quickly by his father. He believed that he was already used to living independently from his time at a boarding school that he attended in Shanghai and being abroad mainly surprised him regarding the lifestyle of local teenagers. Andy elaborated in Extract 1 on his uncomfortable experience during lunch at a Chinese restaurant near the university:

Extract 1: “Perhaps this is related to my personality” (REC190802)

I thought I could blend in/ but in the end/ I found I couldn't// Perhaps this is related to my personality/ Everything they like does not appeal to me at all/ They like football/ the British peers/ they enjoy hip-hop/ Black culture// They like this // very// the kind of// hmm how to put it// The British/ I mean the teenagers/ are very Americanised/ which means they behave like Americans/ not like the British gentleman/ They are loud/ no matter in what aspect ... Maybe this is due to cultural differences/ I could not get used to it ... I can understand their joy/ but I cannot become part of them.

本以为可以尝试融入/但最后发现还真的融不进去//可能和性格有关/就他们喜欢的东西我都不喜欢/他们喜欢足球英国人/喜欢那种说唱/黑人文化//他们喜欢那种//非常的//就是那种//嗯 怎么说 //英国人就是那些小孩子特别美式/就是很像美国人/不像英国人那样很绅士/他们很张扬/各个方面 ... 可能文化不一样吧/但我真的习惯不了 ... 我能懂他们的快乐/但我没法去享受

Andy regards the alienation from classmates as related to his personality. In the extract, he frequently uses the pronouns “they” and “them” to denote distance from the British counterparts, depicting them as “Americanised” and “loud”. Andy further shows his negative affective stance towards their hobbies and lifestyle (“does not appeal to” him; he could not “blend in” and “could not get used to it”). In this sense, he exhibits his personality as a student growing up in the traditional Chinese culture, or as he clarified later – from the “Confucius cultural zone” that values modesty and obedience to the group. In this vein, Andy’s personality is intertwined with ideas of culture, indicating his lack of cultural belonging. He conceived this period as so dull that he hardly had any highlights except for playing badminton, thus showing uneasiness about fitting into what he considered the localised cultural practice. Andy admitted this was also partly owing to his limited English proficiency. He once talked

about gaining permanent residency in the UK for prospective career opportunities but expressed later that he still could not blend in even after all these years. In 2022, when I became more familiar with the participant, Andy even viewed himself as having mental issues (“twisted”) caused by staying overseas alone for many years.

That said, Andy seemed aware of his privilege of coming to the UK early (“not common” and “rare”), as exemplified by the following account:

Extract 2: Andy’s evaluation of classmates (REC190802)

It was not common to come here to study for high school/ it was rare back then ... I feel that people who came to the UK from high school generally had an affluent family background/ I may be the poorest among them// These people ... made you feel that they were very polite/ very restrained/ and they did not show off their wealth/ very low key// Then/ the people I met in my undergraduate course can be divided into two groups/ the ones from wealthy families/ and the others from ordinary families ... For instance/ I did not *share* an apartment with them because they haggled over every ounce ... they were emotional and dramatic// On the contrary/ those who came to the UK early were especially good at dealing with interpersonal relations/ From my perspective/ [they were] more tactful and more considerate of other people’s feelings.

像我这种高中就来这边读的很少见/在那个年代很少见 ... 我现在接触下来就觉得/从高中过来的人普遍家庭状况/经济状况特别好/我可能是这帮人里面家境最差的//那些人 ... 给你感觉就是很有礼貌/非常内敛/没有炫富/很低调//然后/从本科遇到的人就分两类人/一类就是家境也蛮好的/另外就是家境可能一般 ... 例子嘛/以前之所以不*share*房子就是因为这群人在金钱上斤斤计较 ... 就情绪很多/撕逼的也是他们//反而那些早早来到英国的就特别会处理人际关系/我自己觉得/就更圆滑一些/更会照顾别人的情绪

Andy divides his undergraduate schoolmates into two groups and depicts their personalities, considering those who went to the UK earlier as “polite”, elegant, “low-key”, and able to take care of others’ feelings, with him reportedly being the “poorest” among them. This valuation manifests Andy’s awareness of personality as emanating from the socialisation they all have been exposed to in the UK and from their socioeconomic backgrounds. In contrast, he displays a negative evaluative stance towards his classmates from international high schools in China, with them being referred to as calculating, showing off and less mature interpersonally. By showing appreciation for the characters performed by the former group and using self-denigration, Andy strategically displays his group membership to the former, whereas he portrays the latter as less morally upstanding concerning manners and cultivation. In line with a view of class as something that people perform through situated discourse and semiotic practices instead of stratified categories (Thurlow and Jaworski 2017) and drawing upon the notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1994),

Andy can be seen here as experiencing emotional difficulties to fit into localised cultural practices rather than in terms of class. During my observations, Andy appeared to keep a small network with other Chinese students. His doctoral classmate described his introverted personality as an *otaku* (indoor man). He attributed this lifestyle partly to his unpleasant experience in high school, which impacted his socialisation in the UK over the years.

5.2 “But now, the most important thing is to push myself”: a helpless PhD student in the engineering department

From when I met Andy in 2019, Andy had been working on revising data and spent much time conducting lab experiments; without satisfactory data and analysis for his science-based dissertation, he could not proceed to the next stage. He commuted between his accommodation and the lab most weekdays, with the lab being a small room with little ventilation within which he used to spend several hours in order to capture the data generated from the analytical devices. Compared with the rest of the chaotic and dusty environment occupied by other postgraduate or undergraduate students, this room seemed quieter and lonelier. The wait for accurate data was exhausting for most doctoral students in the lab. A secondary participant, Tom, could not get the desired signals and murmured “how depressing” while I was observing at his lab. I asked him what he meant by “depressing”, and he responded:

Extract 3: The “bitterness” of engineering (REC191112)

What a shame ... It all depends on oneself/ it is up to oneself who keeps the project moving forward// it is very depressing/ you don't know which step you are in the project/ and no one will keep an eye on you ... It would be best if you were proactive// It's not like at the workplace where you have assigned tasks/ Need to keep pushing yourself forward// and staying in this little dark room does not feel comfortable.

关于这个苦 ... 一切都是自己/它没有一个确定的目标/都是自己在把控/自己在推动它前进//你就是非常苦的/就是你不知道自己到哪步了/它是没有人监督你 ... 要时刻敲响警钟//不像在工作里/有任务要完成/一直要自己推动着前进//然后这个小黑屋的话/确实是比较苦逼

Tom voices the importance of being “proactive” and “moving forward” by oneself throughout a research project encompassing a longer duration than perceived tasks at the workplace outside academia. Despite the “pain”, Tom continued refining the experiment, sought advice from his supervisor, the lab technician and a previous

graduate, and ultimately attained the expected outcomes. Tom reckoned this experience had improved his learning and problem-solving abilities, thus enacting a persona as an independent researcher.

Contrary to Tom's perseverance, Andy's wait was less encouraging. He usually came to the lab around noon and sometimes only had one meal daily. The stressful and arduous process created both physical and mental strain. With little progress made, Andy felt helpless with the increasing pressure of graduation. In his accounts during our interactions, references made about his lagging behind the schedule and associated pressures towards his academic tasks were many. For instance, he showed me a Nintendo game called *Zelda* and admitted that he spent much time on computer games during the first two years of his doctoral study. He said that he was not hard-working and was "lazy" sometimes, as he did not follow a healthy routine and played computer games until late at night. His lack of confidence in his research progress was apparent through the end of the academic year on a platform that the university provides to keep track of the PhD candidates' doctoral training where, instead of giving detailed descriptions arranged in numbered columns as shown in previous entries, he wrote, "time management was a huge challenge". Another entry under "skills required to complete objectives" around the same time also displayed:

I can feel my reading, searching and information extraction skills have been improved a lot in the past two years, but now, the most important thing is to push myself.

This "push" is crucial for final-year PhD students because, in the last year, Andy and his classmates did not attend any compulsory modules and mainly worked on their own under the guidance of their supervisors. In addition to performing relevant academic activities, appropriate engagement relies on personal qualities. This is seen in the departments' online self-evaluation form, where expected personal attributes for doctoral students include "knowledge and intellectual abilities", "personal effectiveness", or "research governance and organisation". These personality traits circulated on the platform can thus be considered indexical of a "good PhD student". Nevertheless, Andy's communicative performance did not align with the desired personal attributes like resilience, independence and research governance in the engineering department; he locates the reason for his lagging behind schedule in his personality.

Initially, Andy asked for help but failed to seek enough support because he complained that his supervision team's responses usually took a long time, positioning himself as a helpless researcher. Accordingly, Andy only focused on completing the tasks to reach the next stage. After several months of refining experiments at the lab, he seldom went to the university but mainly stayed at the

accommodation and wrote his thesis. He ultimately passed his *viva* in spring 2021. Andy's performance of the mismatch of expected traits of a doctoral student has generated emotional and material consequences in his job-seeking experiences.

5.3 “Perhaps you need a boss who appreciates your doctoral degree”: a pragmatic yet disappointed jobseeker

Andy admitted that he lacked these personality attributes discursively packaged as enthusiasm or spirit (“devoted and contributing to science”) for a subject and frequently exhibited distance towards the idea of an academic job. During a research team gathering, he stayed in a corner and talked to a recent graduate who worked in finance most of the time. On another occasion, Andy chatted with his research groupmates about “confessing” to his supervisor regarding his plan to find a job outside academia, during which he expressed a sense of insecurity about finding jobs with pressures raised by his age. In response to a classmate's inquiry about the professor's attitude, Andy evaluated the professor's reaction negatively as “superficial”, implying his worries that the perceived advantages of a doctoral degree from a world-renowned university may not necessarily precipitate promising career opportunities.

During an interview, I asked Andy why he pursued a doctorate in the first place. He replied without hesitation that he did a PhD to find a job, and further details are demonstrated in the extract below:

Extract 4: Andy's negative evaluation of his major (REC190802)

Author	When you completed your master's degree/ [like you said earlier] at that time/ your classmates have made some progress in their career	当时读完研究生/那你当时身边的人也都事业有成了
Andy	I was confused too// I was reluctant to work [immediately after graduation]/ thinking that once I started to work/ I need to take care of/ earn a salary/ and support my girlfriend/ [I] thought it was not easy/ was avoiding a pragmatic matter ((lines omitted))	我也很迷茫呀// 那时候也不想工作/觉得一工作就要照顾/ 要有收入/就要供女朋友/ 就觉得很麻烦/其实也是逃避一个很现实的问题
Andy	If I were to choose again/ I would not choose to pursue a doctorate in this major [...].At that time/ I received little career guidance from others// with no career planners/ and my family wasn't aware of the importance of it/ My parents reckoned that the major did not matter/ saying that work did not wholly depend on your specific areas of expertise/	... 如果我重新再选择的话/我不会选择这个专业的博士 ... 当时没有人给我规划/当时也没什么规划师/家人也不知道这个重要性//家人觉得这个都差不多/家人觉得工作其实和你学业没有太大关系/有很多跨专业的/主要还是看能力/那我也听信这个/但后来觉得并不是这个样

(continued)

	and many [job positions] are interdisciplinary / It primarily depends on personal abilities// I was persuaded by this/ But later I found it was not the case/ especially obtaining a degree at this level/ the professionalism has much value/ because the speaking right/ doctoral graduates can have a powerful saying in government agencies and enterprises (lines omitted)	子/尤其是读到这个等级的/专业能力的价值就体现出来了/因为这个话语权/博士的话语权太高了 /在政府机关 /在企业里面
Author	Last time you mentioned where was the value of PhD/ was it because of this major/ so what do you think?	... 上回说PhD价值在哪里/是因为这个专业所以你觉得?
Andy	This major was not promising/ I am not optimistic about my major/ and I don't think this major has much potential [for me] in the future.	专业不行/我并不看好现在的这个专业/我觉得这个专业以后也没什么前途

Andy admits his desire to gain a doctoral degree initially as avoiding a “pragmatic” problem and expresses a sense of pity (e. g., “if I were to”). He further reflects on his previous experiences and presents his past self as a youngster without enough awareness or support regarding career building. This indicates the limited support he had been exposed to during his overseas education, revealing international students’ lack of access to resources in HE settings. He goes on to describe his parents as having insufficient knowledge in career guidance and rephrases a general idea of “personal abilities” within his family. He takes a step back and critically examines this idea by underscoring the symbolic value of a PhD degree (e. g., “can have a powerful saying”), but shows a negative stance towards his field of expertise (“not promising”). His ambivalent stance on the “value” attached to doctoral training indicates his profit-oriented persona.

Along with Andy’s negative evaluations towards his research area, he perceived his training also came with the cost of the long years and possibly a more narrowed career path. His sense of insecurity about finding satisfactory jobs was evident. He said employers found it easier to train fresh graduates in their early 20s, and undergraduates were “cheaper”. Andy’s anxiety implies his positioning as a disadvantaged employer whose personality was somehow stuck and his awareness of employers’ preference to hire younger graduates who can be more easily moulded (and exploited). In the following extract, Andy explicitly acknowledged the dilemmas:

Extract 5: “Perhaps you need a boss who appreciates your doctoral degree”
(REC191016)

Andy	I'm this old [...] this is different/ I came to do a PhD to find a job	都已经这么大了 ... 这个是不太一样/我当初就是为了找工作才读博的
Author	Oh	哦
Andy	But I can't say for sure until after several years/ I don't know/ maybe there will be improvements/ Now I can only imagine/ hearing from friends and other people// Luck also plays a role in job-seeking	但是真觉得/不知道/或许会有提升吧但这个东西/或许几年后才能说/我现在也不敢/都是想当然/听朋友说/听别人说//但是这东西还有运气这个成分/找工作的话
Author	It depends on whether you fit in	就是要看气场跟公司合不合
Andy	Perhaps you need a boss who appreciates your doctoral degree/ and then [the degree] is useful	说不定碰到一个老板很赏识你这个博士生/这样就一下子又有用了
Author	But your PhD has to mean something	它肯定不会有啥坏处吧
Andy	A PhD is respected in society/ But in academia/ a PhD is a must [...] Then I'd rather/ Why not use my strengths in other industries [...] Going out [of academia] to the company/ I may have better abilities than others/ even than the boss/ but can't speak properly and have no experience/ don't know how to deal with them [...]	社会上对博士还是蛮好的/很尊重/但是在学术界的话这个就是最基本的东西 ... 那我宁可/为什么不拿我的长处去社会上呢 ... 出去去公司里/可能已经比其他入好很多了/但是这就遇到一个问题/你虽然能力比对方强/比上司强/但是不会说话/没有经验/不知道怎么打交道...

Andy first admits his frustrations about finding jobs and the pressure caused by his increasing age. The hedging expressions (“can't say for sure”, “maybe” and “luck also plays a role”) indicate his lack of confidence and infers a negative stance towards the meaning of his doctoral training. Being able to sympathise as a fellow PhD student, I echo by showing my awareness of the labour market that depends on the training of a particular persona, followed by Andy saying, “perhaps” the boss would appreciate a doctoral degree, suggesting his sense of uncertainty. I respond by prompting his ideas of the value of his doctoral training. He recognises the symbolic value of a PhD and that he may have “stronger abilities” than his future colleagues. Andy explained in the same conversation later that academic training facilitates project management skills, critical thinking and broadened horizons; however, he struggled with performing these personality traits to employers as these attributes were less articulatable during job interviews. Finally, he depicts his personality as less skilful at interpersonal relations (“can't speak properly” and “don't know how to deal with them”) than imagined co-workers. This worry also implies his consciousness that the labour market may value experience over educational qualifications. Andy displayed a mixed evaluation of the personality development brought about by PhD training and realised that the transferability of the perceived value of his education to the labour market outside academia seemed modest. What Andy had experienced

emotionally may not be the same for his classmates. For example, Tom planned to find a postdoc after graduation and appreciated his parents' support, which reveals the financial aspect of sustaining his passion alongside other forms of cultural capital associated with the academic persona.

After returning to China, the transfer to other industries was not as smooth as Andy envisaged. He did an internship and found that the company had occasionally pre-determined job offers. He quipped, "So now I see, these state-owned enterprises rely on social networks, with no regard to ability; it's all about networks". A mismatch emerged as his staying overseas for many years did not help sustain social or professional networks in China. Additionally, he was aware of this job-hunting as "lowering" himself to compete with masters or bachelors, realising that the advantage of having a PhD was research. It can be suggested that doing a PhD for Andy was reduced to gaining a certificate, with all other elements deprived of value or enjoyment.

In spring 2022, Andy finally secured a management position in a Shanghai technology company. He claimed a *hukou* in Shanghai but found his job less satisfactory than anticipated regarding the business-dominated mode of operation and social relations. After a few months, Andy changed to work at a multinational chemical company. He also considered switching jobs in the hi-tech industry and engaged in self-learning projects. He simultaneously displayed an affective evaluation of the lifestyle in the UK, where "people have more choices"; this explains why international students like Andy went to the UK for education in the first place. Paradoxically, he seemed reminiscent of the past when he wrote his thesis, saying that "research may be more interesting and meaningful". He exhibits a positive evaluative stance towards the moral values attached to research. This stance contrasts with the ones he showed before, indicating that the previous tensions and disalignment with academia have somehow been resolved given time. In this vein, Andy's struggles and life choices could be better understood across a chain of communication events from HE to the labour market.

6 Discussion and conclusion

This paper zooms in on Andy, a Chinese final-year doctoral student's situated communication practices in HE settings in the UK, and how he made sense of the uncertainty and insecurity when incorporating into the labour market upon returning to China, with specific attention to how his personality traits emerged from his trajectory. Andy reflexively talked about his sense of loneliness, performed a mismatch with the desired personality attributes of a doctoral student in the

engineering department, and repeatedly enacted the position of disadvantaged returnee in his narrated trajectory. My ethnographic observations can shed light on the moments when power exerts influence on subject formation (Foucault 1980) in the specific institutional setting of the university engineering department, where specific personality traits are considered desirable (e.g., motivated, diligent, independent, and self-disciplined). Under such expectations, the responsibility to succeed academically depended not only on the training of particular repertoires to complete the academic tasks but also, to a large extent, on an individual's capacity to perform appropriate forms of personhood. The institutional emphasis on personal qualities is mobilised to the process of categorisation in the department and has stratifying effects on transnational doctoral students. The normalised discourses on appropriate personality traits could help shape researchers such as Tom (who is well-aligned with the expectations). Still, it may generate consequences for social actors like Andy, who regards himself as less likely to fulfil the desired attributes and who has no one to blame.

However, the intensive attention to personal responsibility may obscure the (structural) inequality in transnational higher education, such as the lack of access to academic and social support in the department and career guidance provided by the university, which was implicitly manifested from his accounts. Instead, from my observations, the participants worked independently most of the time in the final year with limited social networks. These constraints have made the meaning-making of competent academic labour more difficult for Andy to negotiate and achieve. Andy's positioning as a helpless researcher and affective disorientation towards academia were gradually reinforced in our interactions, revealing his subjective experiences of dealing with the pressures caused by academic tasks. Andy's performance of the mismatch and recurrent negative stances towards academia seem to mediate and express resistance against the overwhelming responsibility placed on individuals to succeed in a neoliberal society (both inside and outside academia).

In addition to the challenges in HE settings, the process of becoming a professional impacts trajectory of socialisation and access to symbolic and material resources outside academia. Andy's narrative trajectory uncovers the dilemmas and frustrations in joining the labour market when he returned to China. This contradicts the widely assumed mobility of Chinese transnational academic labour (e.g., Chen and Koyama 2013). Andy expressed anxieties and insecurities when transitioning into the labour market, chiefly because he lacked a sustained network and that employers may value work experience over education certifications outside academia. Meanwhile, Andy considers his personality as stuck with a sense of insecurity on performing desired character, professional repertoires, and skills emblematic of a sellable "product" (Urciuoli 2008). It can be

suggested that the meaning of doing a PhD is reduced to gaining an advanced “entry ticket” to employability. The ubiquitous discourses on constant improvements and self-fulfilment (Gershon 2011) compel Andy’s self-learning projects after securing a job; this also manifests new vehicles of self-governance under the process of “flexibilization” (Fraser 2003). This paper thus illustrates the everyday struggles of transnational students in certain situations.

Overall, Andy’s story contributes to the field of sociolinguistics exploration of mobile social actors’ trajectories in the neoliberal academic world through the lens of communicatively mediated (in)appropriate personality traits in HE settings and narrated experiences after returning to China. Andy’s case can reveal how wider structures shape (and are shaped by) individual trajectories of socialisation and the consequences (both emotional and material) that such trajectories have on individuals’ access to symbolic and material resources, including categories of personality development and what they allow actors to do (or not to do). His story could explain why sometimes the symbolic capital resulting from academic training from a prestigious university could not wholly transfer into valuable resources that Andy can mobilise in the labour market outside academia. The analysis of Andy’s discursive enactment and negotiation of personality traits through a connected series of communicative events indicates his emotional responses and potential forms of resistance to specific aspects of neoliberalism (e.g., hyper-subjectivity). This paper shows “our thoughts, actions, and struggles as human beings” underpinning the neoliberalising processes beyond the “merely calculating participants in the market driven by profit” (Park 2021b: 7) despite the structural constraints to our actions. Further work could extend the range of experiences studied regarding the complexities and potential struggles involved in the making of academic labour and consequences on transnational subjects as they navigate through the circuits of knowledge, resources and labour between China and the UK.

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