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Yuan, Mei

2021

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Yuan , M , Sude , B , Chen , N & Dervin , F 2021 , ' Here you have to face the real China! : International students experiences at a Chinese superdiverse university ' , Journal of Educational Research , vol. 109 , 101807 . <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jjer.2021.101807>

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/334549>

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jjer.2021.101807>

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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

## International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures)

# “Here you have to face the real China!”: International students’ experiences at a Chinese superdiverse university

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Minzu  
internationalization  
China  
stay abroad  
Belt and Road Initiative  
superdiversity  
interculturality

## ABSTRACT

Using the concept and approach of *superdiversity*, this paper complements current studies on the internationalization of higher education by focusing on the understudied case of an ethnic-group serving institution in China. 17 international students at this superdiverse institution, where members of the 56 Chinese ‘ethnic’ Minzu groups live and study together, were interviewed about their experiences in Chinese and English. Considering the originality and complexity of this specific Chinese context, the authors chose Dialogic Discourse Analysis to analyse the data. This complex analytical method allows to identify and problematise the ways superdiversity seems to have influenced (or not) the students’ stay in China and their engagement with Minzu. Although superdiversity is reported as a pull factor for most students, their experiences of it and encounters with members of different Minzu groups, appear to be limited. However, the students’ knowledge and awareness of this important aspect of Chinese society is compelling when the students discuss what they have learnt interculturally. They also seem to have modified many of their essentialist and culturalist representations of China. The article ends with recommendations for both scholars and Ethnic group-serving institutions in China and elsewhere, for rethinking intercultural experiences in study abroad.

## 1. Introduction

Although the COVID-19 crisis seems to have put educational mobility and migration on hold for a moment, more than half a million international students were registered at Chinese institutions of higher education in 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2019), which means that, according to Tsegay et al. (2018: 184), “China is becoming one of the world’s leading destination countries for international students from all over the world”. Today, research on the students’ experiences in the Middle Kingdom has also started to grow both in China and internationally (Tian, Dervin, & Lu, 2020). Many studies have concentrated on the students’ intercultural growth, with a broad focus on ‘Chinese culture’, but appear to be ambivalent about it (e.g. Tian & Lowe, 2013).

Many such studies have often treated host institutions as homogeneous and monolithic, purging them of the potential influence of their local plurality on students’ intercultural growth and labelling the local students merely as ‘Chinese’ – disregarding China’s internal diversity. Using the concept and approach of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007), as an essential component of interculturality, this paper complements current studies on the internationalization of Chinese higher education by focusing on the understudied case of

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2021.101807>

Received 23 February 2021; Received in revised form 14 May 2021; Accepted 15 May 2021

Available online 7 June 2021

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so-called Ethnic-minority serving institutions (Xiong, 2020), referred to as Minzu (民族) universities here. In this paper we use the term Minzu to refer to Chinese superdiversity as it avoids misperceptions and inadequate connotations contained in words like *ethnicity*, *minority*, *nationality* in English and other languages. In China there are 17 Ethnic Minority Colleges and Universities, where members of the 56 Chinese Minzu groups live and study together. Minzu University of China (中央民族大学; MUC hereafter), a national-level institution located in Beijing, is used here as a case study to examine the position and experiences of international students. MUC has a 'key university status' in China and is transdisciplinary, with around 20,000 students and 1,200 staff. Each year around 400 international students are registered at MUC. Its objective is to build a 'first-class ethnic university in the world'.

On MUC campus, members of the official 56 Minzu groups of China live and study together in different kinds of programs. International students joining the university can take tens of different degree programs, with many focusing on Minzu issues. Considering the superdiversity that is represented by both the social-interactional and study characteristics of MUC, we hypothesize that such a rich educational context could have a positive influence on international students' intercultural growth, especially in terms of experience, perceptions of China and reflections on Self and Other (Holliday, 2010). 17 international students from this superdiverse institution were interviewed to test this hypothesis.

## 2. Minzu superdiversity as a special entry into interculturality?

### 2.1. Problematising superdiversity

Introduced in 2007 as a convoluted analytical lens of the multifaceted (internal and international) migration flows in the British context by Steven Vertovec, superdiversity is used mostly to describe today's link between the demographic complexities of ('Western') postmodern societies and political, economic, policy, technological and socio-cultural changes. Vertovec (2007: 1025) describes superdiversity as the "transformative diversification of diversity". According to Arnaut & Spotti (2015: 1) "Superdiversity rests on the growing awareness that over the past two and a half decades the demographic, sociopolitical, cultural, and sociolinguistic face of societies worldwide has been changing due to ever faster and more mobile communication technologies and software infrastructures, along with the ever-expanding mobility and migration activity related to major geopolitical changes around 1990". A large amount of research fields uses the concept and approach: anthropology, geography, law, linguistics, political science, urban planning (amongst others). The concept has been used to describe many and varied phenomena such as cultural, linguistic and cultural elements in different countries: e.g. Belgium, Egypt, Israel, Italy, Japan, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. Superdiversity is often presented as a critique and an alternative way of talking about diversity beyond e.g. the dichotomy of multiculturalism and interculturalism (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Fomina, 2006). What is more, according to Blommaert (2015: 82), this concept and approach to diversity can help scholars move beyond "the rules of a spatially imagined political, historical, social, cultural and linguistic monocentricity". Ndhlovu (2015: 33) claims that one of the most important consequences of superdiversity is "the increase in the lack of predictability of people's identities, their belief systems, their linguistic repertoires and how their needs can best be met both by government and non-government agencies".

In 2017 Vertovec reevaluated the influence of the concept in global research. He notes that superdiversity is used in many, varied and sometimes problematic ways in research:

- A synonym for 'very much' diversity (Aspinall & Song, 2013);
- A way of talking about the presence of 'more ethnicity' (people from more countries) (Syrett & Lyons, 2007);
- A backdrop for a study, a new condition or setting (Burdsey, 2013);
- A call to move beyond ethnicity and to include additional identity markers such as gender;
- A call for methodological reassessment of studying e.g. communication and the Structure (Blommaert, 2015);
- A multidimensional reconfiguration of social forms to include multiple variables when analysing diversity (Longhi, 2013);
- A device for drawing attention to new social complexities such as globalization and migration, ethnic categories and social identities, and new social formations.

For Vertovec (2017: 125), the latter, which he refers to as "the search for better ways to describe and analyse new social patterns, forms and identities arising from migration-driven diversification", is the most appealing aspect of superdiversity. On top of these aspects, Vertovec (2017: 126) asserts that diversification leads to new and/or revised phenomena such as representations (prejudice), inequality and segregation, but also new encounters with space and "contact" (so-called cosmopolitanism and creolization). Superdiversity as a concept and an approach is meant to support scholars in moving beyond the essentializing of groups by being critical of methodological nationalism and ethno-national perspectives (Vertovec, 2007).

Many critical voices have also assessed the use of superdiversity in research. This is the case of Finex Ndhlovu (2015) in an important article entitled "A decolonial critique of diaspora identity theories and the notion of diversity". In the article the scholar reviews the limitations of superdiversity, which we find to be important for our study:

- Although superdiversity tries to describe what is referred to as 'new' phenomena, Ndhlovu (2015: 34) claims that "there is absolutely nothing new and novel about this since migration is not a new phenomenon at all", reminding us e.g. that pre-modern and pre-colonial African societies also experienced 'superdiversity' but have been labelled otherwise by Westerncentric research.

- Following Makoni (2012), Ndhlovu (2015: 34) is critical of the illusion of equality, social justice and positivity created by superdiversity as referring to changing and multidimensional patterns, as if they were taking place in a neutral, and symmetrical world.
- Superdiversity as a Westerncentric concept seems to impose a worldview of identities “often masked behind discourses of universalism, modernity, globalization and other similar terminologies” (Ndhlovu, 2015: 28). Ndhlovu (2015: 29) thus asserts that superdiversity eclipses alternative explanatory and analytical frameworks, especially from the Global South, such as Decoloniality and Southern Theory.

In the field of intercultural communication education, Holliday (2010: 74) warns about the somewhat resistant “lack of belief that the non-Western Other can be complex and sophisticated just like us.” As such, the international literature on the concept of superdiversity seems to ignore the Chinese context. Very few publications were identified about the topic of superdiversity or superdiversity was used as an approach in research on China. The few available studies focus on some aspects of language issues (Dong et al., 2012: 349). On the other hand, Varis and Wang (2011), in their study of the internet in China, examine both the ‘heterogeneity’ and the multiple layers of normativity of superdiversity in the Chinese virtual sphere. Some studies of superdiversity relate to Chineseness but in contexts of migration. For instance, Huang (2018) in *Discourses of Chineseness and superdiversity*, focuses on superdiversity and difference in the British Chinese diaspora.

What discussions of superdiversity in relation to study abroad in China, especially within the context of Minzu institutions, could help us achieve and take into account include:

- According to Fanshawe and Sriskandrajah (2010), the potential main benefit of considering superdiversity as a lens is that “people can’t be put in a box anymore”. This can also help scholars revise established differences and hierarchies related to discourses of multiculturalism and interculturality (Vertovec, 2017). This is important to move beyond Blommaert’s (2015) ‘monocentricity’ and to take into account the fact that “people’s identities, their belief systems, their linguistic repertoires” are not always predictable (Ndhlovu, 2015).
- Kell (2013) argues that superdiversity, in relation to sociolinguistic issues, can help us add “layer upon layer of complexity”. This is where the notion of Chinese Minzu could come into play.

## 2.2. Chinese Minzu as superdiversity?

Although research on international students in China is expanding, especially in relation to students’ adaptation (Su, 2017), acculturation (Tian & Lu, 2018), academic socialization (Ding, 2016), studies on students’ experiences often fail to take the superdiversity of China into account – especially in relation to Minzu aspects. Although superdiversity has been applied mostly to the context of migration to the West and some big metropolitan areas around the world, we believe that it is relevant to China as a multi-Minzu country. China is not an ‘empire of uniformity’ as was asserted by the American geographer Jared Diamond (1996), and by many other scholars and commentators (see Cheng, 2007). For Mullaney (2016: 290) Chinese ‘ethnic diversity’ (Minzu) is based on histories of “the *longue durée* history of empire, migration, human geography, and cultural interaction; and the history of how and why, at different moments in time, human societies choose to categorize, organize, and administer human difference in one way over another.”

The Middle Kingdom is in fact a unitary multiethnic state, for which superdiversity is a central characteristic. It is important to note that Minzu groups in China are indigenous peoples. Politically Minzu groups are the product of an ethnic classification project started in China in 1953 and finished in 1990 (Zang, 2016). 56 Minzu group identities and memberships are officially recognized by the Chinese State today. The Han ‘majority’ represents about 91.5 % of the population while the other 55 Minzu groups such as the Huis, Mongols, Manchus and Tibetans, 8.5 % (Zang, 2016: 1). With a population of 106 million, these 55 Minzu groups account for 8.41% of the country’s total population (Ma, 2017: 130). China has been described as consisting of different Minzu groups that interact with each other and have been integrated into the Chinese nation during its long history. Different Minzu groups are scattered in different territories of the country, with many concentrated on border regions with e.g. Kazakhstan, Korea, Mongolia, and Russia. Although politically the ‘borders’ between Minzu affiliations are clear-cut, which may divide superdiversity into nice and neat pieces of diversity, the reality is much more complex. Wang and Du (2018: n. p.) argue that “it is necessary to point out that Minzus are not a group of homogenous people. The differences within ethnic minorities should not be ignored as well”. In the field of Critical Han Studies, Joniak-Luthi (2015) looks into the identity nuances of narratives of the Han Minzu in her book *The Han: China’s Diverse Majority*. She shows how this complex identity which tends to be essentialized by some Western scholars is maintained and reproduced. Finally, it is also important to note that some Minzu groups have different first languages on top of Chinese Mandarin, the common language of Mainland China.

There are some theoretical underpinnings of Minzu such as the notion of “plurality within unicity”. In 1988 anthropologist Fei (1988) published the oft-quoted paper “The Chinese Nation with Multi-ethnic Groups” which contains a macro-theory of the formation and structural characteristics of the Chinese nation. His main analytical element of China as a unified multi-ethnic country is summarized in the phrase 一体多元 (*yiti duoyuan, united but pluralistic*). The idea of “Pluralistic Unity of the Chinese Nation” emphasises both difference and similarity between Minzu groups and its concerns have more to do with economic development rather than e.g. issues of political equality. Going back to Ndhlovu’s (2015) critique of superdiversity as a Westerncentric concept we could add Minzu to the list of alternative explanatory and analytical frameworks - alongside e.g. Decoloniality and Southern Theory.

In this short summary of Minzu in Mainland China, we see that the notion of Chineseness, although it covers all citizens of the country, is much more complex than one would expect and can be both conceptualized and examined in terms of superdiversity.

Chinese individuals tend to experience this superdiversity in terms of (amongst others) languages, cultures, and sometimes world-views/religions. Their identity thus tends to be situated on a continuum of Chineseness and Minzu. Like superdiversity, Minzu is used here both as a concept referring to ‘very much’ diversity but also to the presence of ‘more ethnicity’ and as the backdrop for the Chinese context of study abroad (Vertovec, 2017). Minzu can also serve as a move beyond ethnicity to include e.g. socio-economics and gender.

Song and Xia (2020: 3) argue that “existing studies on international students’ intercultural experiences have not paid adequate attention to the potential impact of the socio-economic and cultural diversity within China”. Our paper aims to contribute to filling in this gap with a case study at a superdiverse Minzu university in Beijing.

### 3. Materials and Methods

In our study, we wish to contribute to ‘diversifying’ research on study abroad in China, beyond an implicit/explicit monolith, and to offer a new way to describe and analyse students’ experiences. Superdiversity serves as a lens to examine the experiences of international students at a Chinese Minzu University (Vertovec, 2017). Based on interviews with 17 international students we ask the following questions:

- Why did the student choose this specific superdiverse university? What were their motivations and expectations?
- What is their experience of it? How much does superdiversity seem to influence their experience?
- What is the impact of the university superdiversity on their views of China and the Chinese? Does it increase their sense of “the transformative diversification of diversity” (Vertovec, 2007: 1025)?

All in all, we are interested in how much superdiversity seems to guide the students’ experiences of Minzu University.

17 international students (10 males and 7 females), whose age ranged from 22 to 24, were recruited for individual interviews through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). All the countries represented by the students, belong to the group of 138 countries of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - close economic partners of China. 12 of the students were from countries bordering China, with some of them sharing linguistic and cultural characteristics with Chinese Minzu (e.g. students 8 and 16). The students in our research were all degree students (Master’s Level) studying Chinese as a second language in the same class, which allows us to consider the participants to share enough basic similarities for comparative purposes. Table 1 summarizes the students’ characteristics.

Each individual interview, which took place in a separate room at a café on MUC campus, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was led in both Chinese and English. Two of the authors were sitting with the students during the interviews and asked questions in turn. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The Chinese elements were translated and cross-checked between all the writers to ensure coherence and transparency of the transcriptions. Once the transcriptions and translations were ready, we performed a first deductive coding of the interviews to identify relevant moments of engagement with and positioning about *superdiversity*, *identity* and *Minzu* in the data (von dem Berge, Poguntke, Obert, & Tipei, 2013). 52 such moments were identified in the 17 interviews. A systematic analysis of the collected excerpts ensued, by means of discourse analysis in its dialogic form (see e.g. Matusov et al., 2019). This discursive perspective, which complexifies the way data is treated ‘below the surface of what people utter’, assumes the centrality of dialogism in human sociocultural practices (Linell, 1994). This means that what speakers utter (e.g. interviewees in this paper) is considered to derive from multiple dialogues, whose sources include the ‘real’ utterer (e.g. the research participant refers to a media report to justify an argument), the interlocutors (e.g. interviewers here) and (‘invisible’) audiences (e.g. direct addressees, potential overhearers). It is important to note that some of these sources are not always identifiable (Linell, 1994). In their utterances, interview participants (the ‘speakers’) handle, manipulate and arrange these many and varied voices to construct answers to questions (Linell, 1994). In order to analyse the data dialogically, we have systematically examined how discourses of superdiversity, identity and Minzu were constructed through the use of multiple sources. The method consisted in combing through the excerpts, using

**Table 1**  
Students’ characteristics

Student	Nationality	Gender	Subject
1	Indonesian	F	Chinese as a second language
2	Indonesian	F	Chinese as a second language
3	South Korean	F	Chinese as a second language
4	Uzbek	M	Chinese as a second language
5	South Korean	M	Chinese as a second language
6	Uzbek	M	Chinese as a second language
7	Lao	M	Chinese as a second language
8	Mongolian	M	Chinese as a second language
9	Egyptian	F	Chinese as a second language
10	Thai	M	Chinese as a second language
11	Vietnamese	F	Chinese as a second language
12	Congolese	F	Chinese as a second language
13	Kazakh	M	Chinese as a second language
14	Uzbek	M	Chinese as a second language
15	Pakistani	M	Chinese as a second language
16	Vietnamese	F	Chinese as a second language
17	Italian	M	Chinese as a second language

linguistic elements indicative of dialogism such as *represented discourses* (i.e. using the voice of others to support a claim, the ‘real’ utterer), *subjectively marked terms* (such as adjectives and verbs, see [Johansson & Suomela-Salmi, 2011](#)). Considering the complexity of the superdiverse context under review, we argue that, by means of a Dialogic Discourse Analysis, we can identify specificities and similarities in the way superdiversity seems to influence (or not) how the participants describe and problematize their stay in China and their engagement with Minzu superdiversity. In order to grasp the participants’ complex engagement with the “transformative diversification of diversity” ([Vertovec, 2007](#): 1025), represented by superdiversity, Dialogic Discourse Analysis appears to be a suitable method.

#### 4. Analysis

The analytical part consists of three sections. In the first section, we examine the reasons mentioned by the students for choosing China and MUC as study contexts, and try to identify the role of superdiversity in their arguments. The second section focuses on the students’ social life in relation to Minzu. Finally, section three uses the three keywords of *superdiversity*, *identity* and *interculturality* to explore what the students claim to have learnt about China, being located on a superdiverse campus.

##### 4.1. Reasons for choosing China and Minzu

This first section presents the reasons why the students chose a Minzu university in China. At first when they discuss their general choices for Mainland China, they tend to follow similar paths as students in other studies ([Jiani, 2016](#)). Some of the students were attracted by what could be labelled as Chinese cultural elements ([Jiani, 2016](#)). For instance, two students from Indonesia mention their interests in different aspects of Chinese ‘culture’:

###### Excerpt 1 – Student 2

I started learning Chinese in high school, and I majored in Chinese as an undergraduate. Since I was young, I have been interested in Chinese. I have watched a lot of TV series and movies about ancient China, and I have been very interested in Chinese scenery and culture.

For this student, the interest in China appears to correspond to canonical knowledge about ‘Ancient times’, nature and the generic and polysemic concept of ‘culture’. Interestingly the other student mentions the fact that a very popular contemporary Chinese singer 周杰伦 (Jay Chou) triggered her interest in China:

###### Excerpt 2 – student 1

Five years ago, I went to Singapore and that time I went to a big concert. I didn’t know who was singing then, and my friend told me his name is Jay Chou. And I wondered where this Jay Chou came from and at that time, I felt like I should marry him. And then I thought I should learn Chinese and I can marry him. This is the real reason why I should choose China and why I should learn Chinese.

Unlike the other student, a somewhat random encounter with a rap artist triggered interest in China and the Chinese language. In general, we note that the interests of the students in China mostly relate to certain ‘typical’ – see stereotypical – aspects of Chineseness (see [Jiani, 2016](#)).

Other students refer to their interests in business and economic affairs as motivations for studying in China. As such one of the Uzbek students mentions the important role of China’s economy:

###### Excerpt 3 – Student 6

When I was young, I was very interested in China. In Uzbekistan, I majored in international economy and China’s economy is developing rapidly. My father also worked in China for two years, and my teacher recommended me to come to China to study Chinese for one year and continue my research for four years.

Two voices are used to add to his motivation for choosing China: his father’s, who had himself worked in China, and a teacher’s. Often, the influence of others on choosing China as a destination is obvious in what the students declare ([Jiani, 2016](#)).

In a similar vein, a South Korean student mentions his expectations concerning the role of China in his future career:

###### Excerpt 4 – Student 5

I majored in economics in college, and the school offered Chinese courses, so I studied Chinese for six months. I’m interested in Chinese, and I hope to have something to do with it in my future job, so I want to know about the situation, life, courses and culture of China. China in my imagination is different from reality. For example, time passes quickly in China, so I need to pay attention to time management.

Like many other students in our research, Student 5 notes that he also wishes to confront his own perceptions of China with the reality. Interestingly, like three other students, he uses the word ‘imagination’ to discuss his pre-conceived ideas about the Middle

Kingdom (“China in my imagination is different from reality”). This could indicate an opening towards Chinese superdiversity, maybe, beyond the monolith (Cheng, 2007).

In what follows we turn to how the students justify their application for programmes at MUC. Here again there appear to be distinctive patterns. Several students mention the recommendations they have received from friends and teachers for choosing MUC, and use different types of dialogism to include their voices:

Excerpt 5 – Student 12

I was introduced by a friend. Through him, I met someone in Congo who told me that the education of MUC was very good, and I believed it.

Excerpt 6 – Student 16

It was fate, because there was one of my senior students who studied in the school, and then she was very good in the school, and then she recommended it to me...

These students, one from Vietnam and one from Congo, have all met someone who was a former student or a current student at MUC from their own countries and decided to apply. The argument that their contact is said to have used is that of the good quality of the institution.

For two students, the choice of MUC relates in/directly to exchange programmes between their home universities and MUC. Student 17, from Italy, was first an exchange student at MUC before joining the institution as a degree student:

Excerpt 7 – Student 17

Actually, for the first time I went to Minzu because I was studying in [a city in Southern Italy], And my university has cooperation with Minzu University. But it is not for Chinese language, it is for Tibetan language. But now there are not a lot of students who study the Tibetan language, so they give me the possibility to study Chinese here.

Through a scholarship meant for those majoring in Tibetan from his Italian university, Student 17 was first able to continue his studies in the Chinese language. One could say that Chinese Minzu superdiversity allowed him indirectly to study in China. Student 1, from Indonesia, also had the opportunity to do an exchange at a top university in Beijing through her home university but chose MUC instead for the following reasons:

Excerpt 8 – Student 1

I should go to Beijing, my university has a cooperation with another university, that is I should choose Renmin University. However, I think I should meet more Chinese people, but not only Han majority, I can meet more ethnic minority people here. And firstly, on the ranks, Minzu University is also a good university in China, and even in Beijing. Secondly, I want to read more about China minority.

Chinese superdiversity seems to have been decisive for Student 1. For her, the other university in Beijing would have meant spending time with ‘Han majority’ students, while MUC offered opportunities to develop relations with superdiverse individuals.

In general, the students mention their awareness of the fact that MUC is a good university but not as prestigious as other universities such as Peking University or Renmin University. However, like Student 1, the superdiverse profile of the institution seems to have won over. Student 7 from Laos claims that he knew nothing about MUC and checked its profile on the Internet:

Excerpt 9 – Student 7

I checked the internet. MUC came out. MUC is very close to the Chinese People’s University [i.e. Renmin University]. I learnt something about it and I thought it was very interesting. There are many ethnic minorities in China, and I would like to know more about them. For foreigners, they only know the Han Minzu. Here, I think some Minzus are very similar to mine. For example, my master’s supervisor is Bouyei, and when I learn Bouyei, I feel it is very similar to the language of our nation.

Interestingly Student 7 notes a similarity between his own language group (Laotian speakers) and the Bouyei language spoken by some Chinese Minzu in the Southern Guizhou Province of China. Laotian and Bouyei are both Kra-Dai languages spoken in Southeast Asia and Southern China. The student refers to the imagined voice of the figure of the ‘foreigner’ (Linell, 1994) in the excerpt – in opposition to his own interest in Minzu superdiversity - to make them say that they don’t know much about Minzu.

In excerpt 11, the student from Egypt shares the questions she asked her teacher before choosing MUC. The superdiverse argument is found in the teacher’s answers:

Excerpt 10 – Student 9

Before I came here, I asked our teacher, *which university is the best?* He said the university was good for us. There are many ethnic groups in this university. Before we come, we will ask a few questions: *what are the grades of this university?* And there are not so

many Egyptians here, so I'm one. So, I will have more opportunities to be with the Chinese, and if there are a lot of Egyptians, I will be with the Egyptians.

One extra argument, on top of the benefits of getting to know Chinese superdiversity, is about the low number of students from her own country at MUC. In most research on study abroad in China and other parts of the world, the presence of co-nationals is often seen as counter-productive in terms of adaptation, language use and learning and intercultural awareness since students are said to be spending too much time with each other (e.g.: [Pho & Schartner, 2019](#)). As a student specializing in Chinese language and culture at MUC, opportunities to meet and speak with Chinese speakers are often seen as primordial ([Gong et al., 2020](#)).

#### 4.2. A superdiverse social life?

In this section, we examine how much of an impact a superdiverse institution like MUC might have on the students' social lives. First, we note that Chinese, English and first languages are used to communicate with others, based on individual skills and shared languages. Second the interviews reveal that the students' social lives are represented by interactions with people referred to as 'friends' who seem to be composed of groups of international students from MUC or other universities in Beijing and/or 'Chinese students', who appear to be Han students in most cases. As we shall see references to Minzu are rare when the students discuss their social lives. There could be different reasons why: 1. The students lump together all of them under the label 'Chinese people/students', 2. Minzu aspects are not so relevant to them since they study Chinese and feel the pressure to use the language, 3. A lack of access to Minzu students other than Han.

In general, we get the impression that there is a lack of interaction with Chinese students. This seems to relate to minimum joint activities organized by the university, but also international students flocking together (see similar results in [Hussain & Hong, 2019](#)). For Student 16: "Han students and foreign students feel that they can't be in touch with each other because they are cut off". Again, the fact that Han students are systematically mentioned – rather than other Minzu students – might derive from the fact that the students specialize in Chinese and feel the need to practice Chinese - Han people's main language.

For some students, their social lives seem divided between socializing with Chinese and international friends – depending on contexts. As such student 1 clearly dichotomizes these encounters:

##### Excerpt 11 – Student 1

I have class with all of my friends, Chinese friends actually. And after I have finished my class, I will always spend time playing with my foreign friends. Maybe for study I will be with my Chinese friends. It will be more helpful and we will help each other. But after the class, Chinese people, you know, they really really like to study hard. But I want to have a balanced life, I should study hard but I will be playing more harder than my study. So, after I finished my class I will be with my foreign friends, because first maybe we can speak English. It will be for us to make me more feel freer. Yeah, because every day we should speak Chinese. It's like after I wake up I should speak Chinese and then I want to sleep I should speak Chinese. It really made me so dizzy.

The compartmentalization of daily social encounters presented by student 1 (and shared by many other students) appears to be utilitarian: time spent with the (generic) Chinese is used for studying, while time with international ('foreign') students is for 'playing'. Several explanations are offered by the student: spending time with international students means using English and thus relaxing, while the use of Chinese makes her feel "dizzy" and pressured. She also uses the typical representation of "Chinese people (...) like to study hard", which is presented as a barrier to socialization after class ([Dervin, Härkönen, Yuan, Chen, & Zhang, 2020](#)). Student 4 from Uzbekistan, told us that, at the time of the interview, they were preparing for exams and that he did not get to meet his Chinese friends since they were not in class together anymore.

A minority of the students that we interviewed (one from Korea, another from Congo) admits spending most of their time with co-nationals.

##### Excerpt 12 – Student 5

I usually go out with my classmates after class. We often go to Wudaokou because there are a lot of Korean restaurants and products there. Because there are a lot of Koreans in China.

Wudaokou (五道口), an area in Beijing, close to MUC, is often referred to as *Korea-town* ([Kim, 2010](#)). Korean students and entrepreneurs but also Chinese Korean Minzu people hang out in the area. The Congolese student also admits socializing with her co-nationals, while spending time at home and being in contact with her Chinese and foreign friends online:

##### Excerpt 13 – Student 12

I usually don't go out. I like to stay home. I like to watch Chinese TV shows and movies. I'm going out with my compatriots. I have a Chinese friend and a foreign friend. But we basically don't see each other. Everyone is very busy and is in their own place. I basically don't go out with the Chinese, but more of my friends, we often exchange on WeChat.

The repetition of the verb 'to go out' structures the student's excerpt: first she claims that she "does not usually go out", second, she refers to going out with her 'compatriots' and third, the verb is used to exclude the 'Chinese' ("I basically don't go out with the



Chinese"). Compartmentalization of social interaction is taking place here too.

The Lao student discusses her social interaction, not in terms of nationality but of co-linguaging:

Excerpt 14 – Student 7

**Interviewer:** But so, who are your friends here?

**Student 7:** Thai friends.

**Interviewer:** and you speak Chinese together or English?

**Student 7:** we speak Laotian... it's the same language.

Laotian, which is of the same language family as Thai, is inter-intelligible and thus creates opportunities for communication with Thai students. In the next excerpt, which follows the previous one, the interviewer asks the student if his language has some similarities to some Minzu languages spoken in Yunnan Province in Southwestern China:

Excerpt 15 – Student 7

**Interviewer:** Do some ethnic minorities in Yunnan have the same language as yours?

**Student 7:** I'm not in touch with them, but there's a language called Zhuang. Zhuang and our language are a bit the same, but not a lot. For everyday communication, we can understand each other.

Although there could be an opportunity for interacting in a common language, Student 7 does not seem to have reaped the benefit of this similarity with some of China's superdiversity to engage with them.

Only one student, amongst the ones we interviewed, seems to have a big interest in Minzu. In what follows the Italian student describes his social interactions:

Excerpt 16 – Student 17

**Student 17:** I don't have a lot of Han friends. I have a lot of Tibetan friends. A lot of Xinjiang friends. That is why I love Minzu. That is a really good point of this university. You can understand others. All kinds of people who are not Han. China is not Beijing or Shanghai. I love these places, so that is why I chose to come here, because I can understand Tibetan of China. I am a fan of Tibet. All the culture, all the history, I really like it. When I come here, wow... a lot of Tibetan people, I can talk with them.

**Interviewer:** How did you meet them?

**Student 17:** In school it is very easy to meet them. If you bring some football, you can find them. If you go jogging, *hello*... Before I don't like this, for I was always with foreigners, French guy, Irish guy, always together. Now it is different. Because language course students, they are going coming, they are just for four months. But the minority students are always here.

As a reminder this student studied at MUC twice: first as an exchange student, followed by a stay as a degree student. During his first stay, he admits spending most of his time with other international students, but, since he started his degree at MUC he has been able to spend more time with 'minority [Minzu] students'. What this excerpt from the interview shows is that Student 17 is eager to meet Minzu students, especially from Tibet since he is "a fan of Tibet". For the student, the message that his time at Minzu seems to have triggered is that China is not homogeneous (he mentions Beijing, Shanghai and Han people) but superdiverse, through the example of Tibet. When asked directly what his time at MUC did to him in terms of perceiving China, he claims:

Excerpt 17 – Student 17

It changed. Now I can understand more compared to my classmates before. They are studying in Italy, in my university, but they don't know what real China is. I changed my view about China. It is a great experience for me in Minzu. Maybe those who study in other universities in Beijing, it is like going to America. A lot of foreign students, they are the same. But here, you have to face the real China.

What Student 17 seems to explain is that MUC differs from other Chinese universities, giving the example of top universities in Beijing. For the student, being an international student at such institutions is like "going to America", in other words, the student seems to assert that these universities do not create a real sense of *dépaysement*, an English word from the French for the feeling of not being at home, in a foreign or different place, a change of scenery. On the contrary, what MUC seems to be doing to students like him is to allow them to "face the real China". We note that the phrase 'real China' is used twice in this excerpt. Based on what student 7 affirms about Minzu, this phrase could refer to Chinese 'superdiversity'.

Finally, when asked about his travels in China, Student 17 shows that his interest and curiosity about Chinese superdiversity have guided his destination decisions:

## Excerpt 18 – Student 17

I was in lots of places in China. Not a lot, cause China is huge. But I have a lot of experience with my friend's family. That was great! I was in my friend's house, because he is a Tuijazu. He said, during the Chinese New Year, *you are here, you are alone, you should come to my house*. I really had such a great time. We went to a lot of places, that was beautiful. I fell in love with China. And I feel *Oh China is amazing*. Because Beijing, I mean, is just a city. But China is all except this big city. Not Shenzhen, Not Shanghai.

Student 17 is the only one who mentions spending time with a Minzu family outside the campus, and outside Beijing. The excerpt is composed of positive evaluative discourses (“That was great!”; “I really had such a great time”; “That was beautiful”; “Oh China is amazing”). Recounting his visit to a friend's family, who was a Tuija, a member of China's eighth largest Minzu in the Wuling Mountains (population of over 8 million), the student describes Chinese superdiversity as different from megacities such as Beijing but also Shanghai and Shenzhen, which he evaluates as “just cit[ies]”.

## 4.3. Learning about Chinese superdiversity: identity and interculturality

Although interaction with Minzu superdiversity appears to be limited in the students' interviews, this section examines if and what the international students seem to have gained in terms of knowledge about Chinese superdiversity. What we noticed is that reflecting on Minzu superdiversity leads students to ponder over identity and interculturality – and in many cases cross-border identities.

Some students admit not being aware of Chinese superdiversity before coming to the Middle Kingdom. This is the case of the student from Pakistan, who explains how he has learnt about Minzu during lectures at MUC:

## Excerpt 19 – Student 15

To be honest, coming to China I did not know that China is a country with many ethnic groups. I thought it was only the Han nationality. So, when I first came, I found that there were 56 ethnic groups. I was surprised. Then there are some literary and cultural lessons in our class. Then the teachers often introduce us to all Minzus and their specific culture, so I now learn and understand more.

The use of the phrase “the specific culture” might hint at a limited and culturalist approach to Minzu superdiversity (Holliday, 2010). Student 16 from Vietnam, seems to know more about Chinese superdiversity, especially in relation to cross-border Minzu groups with similar language backgrounds. In the following excerpt, however, the student contrasts the knowledge she thought she had before and during her stay:

## Excerpt 20 - Student 16

I also know that there are 56 ethnic groups in China, and some ethnic groups are somewhat similar to us, such as Dai and Jing ethnic groups. Before I came to China, I felt that the language and appearance of the Chinese ethnic minorities were different from those of the Han nationality, and some of their customs were also different. I thought that they were usually on the mountains and seldom came down to the plains. Then when I came to China, I found that it was not completely the case. There were some differences in customs and habits. Every ethnic minority has its own customs and habits. However, their appearance is sometimes not very different from that of the Han nationality.

In the excerpt the student refers to the Dai and Jing Minzu groups in Southeastern China, which she assumed were very different from the Han majority – maybe in terms of economic development, see the comment on them living in the mountains in the excerpt. What the sojourn seems to have contributed for student 16 is an awareness of the continuum of difference-similarity in terms of Chinese Minzu superdiversity (Han + Dai and Jing), thus ‘thinking beyond the box’ of differentialism and essentialism (Dervin, 2016).

Student 3 from South Korea makes the same comment concerning facial features and physical traits twice (Liu & Dervin, 2020). For her, it was surprising that many Chinese from different Minzu groups did not look ‘Chinese’:

## Excerpt 21 – Student 3

Before I came to China, I only knew that there were 56 nationalities in China. But after I came here, I found many people who don't look like Chinese. They may be ethnic minorities like Russian, Kazakh, Uyгур, etc., but they are all Chinese, which surprised me a lot. (...)

I think some people, such as Kazakhs, Uyghurs, they look like westerners, but in fact they are Chinese, which is amazing.

In this excerpt the student is made to question her representations of the way Chinese people look – their facial features and physical traits. She notes on two occasions during the interview that some Minzu groups (Chinese Kazakhs, Russians and Uyghurs) look different and even label them as “look[ing] like Westerners – a misidentification reported by some Chinese themselves (e.g. Wu, 1991: 170).

This urges another South Korean to ask the Minzu students he meets on campus their Minzu affiliation as stated in the following excerpt:

## Excerpt 22 - Student 5

In class, if I think someone's appearance is different from other people's, I will ask him what ethnic minority he is. After coming here, I can distinguish some of the minorities.

This leads him to assert having learnt to tell the Minzu of some of the people he meets.

Another interesting phenomenon for some of the international students is the proximity between some Minzu groups and their own peoples in terms of culture and language. One can assert that Chinese superdiversity thus makes them reflect on their own identity and interculturality in terms of similarity and difference. Student 7 from Laos comments on clothing from some Minzu groups which were reminiscent of his own:

## Excerpt 23 - Student 7

I went to the Museum of nationalities and saw clothes from the Bai and Zhuang ethnic groups. It reminded me of the ones we have, and we feel very proud. We also want to show it to our Chinese friends. We also have this kind of clothes. Then, I think Chinese ethnic minorities also have their own clothes, but they don't wear them very much. They wear them only on important festivals. But in Laos, we all wear our own national clothes at school or at work.

In this excerpt the student notes similarities between Laotian clothing and Bai and Zhuang Minzu groups (respectively located in Southwest China and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China), which he evaluates positively, using a generic 'we', probably referring to his own ethnic group back in Laos ("we feel very proud"). At the end of the excerpt, however, he contrasts usage of the clothes in the two countries. A Vietnamese student also comments on these similarities (student 11) of clothing between Vietnamese and Jing people from southeastern China. This student, like others, wished that MUC organized more joint activities with Minzu students in order to explore such similarities.

Finally, since many of the participants are from border countries, they are often mistaken for being Chinese themselves. Their different accents, facial features and physical traits lead to them being mislabeled. For example, Student 16 from Vietnam explains that many Chinese people think that her accent in Chinese is from the South but they assume, based on her face, that she is from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, bordering Afghanistan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan and Tajikistan, where many Turkic peoples live. The Xinjiang mislabeling was also mentioned by Student 10 from Thailand. Student 11 also from Vietnam explains when asked if she is mistaken for a Minzu student:

## Excerpt 24 – Student 11

They don't know what race I am. They only say that I am a minority from Guangxi, or then Yunnan, and then I also say that I am a minority, because I am a jing race. The jing race is the dominant race in our country, but it is a minority in your China and more in Guangxi.

The guessing game from the Chinese concerning her identity makes her describe the fact that she shares an identity with some Minzu Chinese (cross-border identity), that of Jing. She also explains that, unlike China, her 'Minzu' (which she refers to as 'race' in English) in Vietnam is the majority on the other side of the border.

In general, the attitude of the 'Chinese' is presented as very positive towards foreigners. Student 5 from South Korea explains:

## Excerpt 25 - Student 5

Once on a train, some Chinese started speaking to me and thought that I was Chinese and offered to say hello to me. Then I said I was a foreigner. *Oh do you want some apples? Do you eat pears?*

However, Student 6 from Uzbekistan told us of a negative experience based on misidentification:

## Excerpt 26 – Student 6

I once lived in a dorm, he thought I was from Xinjiang, the attitude is very bad. I told him I was a foreigner, but he didn't believe me. I showed him my passport. And then he said *I'm sorry. I have water. Would you like to have some?*

Replaying a dialogue with a dormmate the student shows how the misidentification to a person from Xinjiang led to mistreatment, corrected by revealing the truth about his national identity. The direct quote from the dormmate shows a shift in his attitude once the misidentification is 'corrected'.

## 5. Discussion

This paper proposed to complement current studies of internationalization of Chinese higher education, focusing on international students from different Belt and Road countries studying for a Master's in Chinese as a Second Language. In the analysis we have used the concept and analytical lens of *superdiversity* to look into the experiences and perceptions of international students at a superdiverse Minzu university in China. Although superdiversity has been used mostly to look into 'Western' contexts of migration (Vertovec, 2007), we have applied it to a specific context of internationalization in the 'Global South' (Ndhlovu, 2015: 29). To our knowledge no

previous study has focused on this element in research on study abroad in China or elsewhere.

It is important to note that our study was limited by the choice of international students who specialized in Chinese language and culture, which seemed to have an influence on their interests in exploring Minzu superdiversity. International students specializing in e.g. Minzu anthropology or Minzu 'minority' languages and cultures might have experienced campus superdiversity differently.

The results could confirm that, as a concept and a lens, superdiversity represents a powerful way to analyse international students' intercultural encounters on a superdiverse campus in China. Since the focus is on encounters with 'obvious' diverse Chinese citizens (beyond a homogenized representation of the Chinese as an "empire of uniformity", Jared, 1996) we argue that this analytical framework can help researchers move beyond studies that contribute to essentializing 'locals', questioning the general lack of consideration for the non-Western Other as "complex and sophisticated" (Vertovec, 2007; Holliday, 2010: 74). As a reminder, most studies on international students in China – but also in other contexts – have treated local universities as somewhat homogeneous, purging them of their potential superdiversity. Combining Dialogic Discourse Analysis and elements of superdiversity proves to be useful to complexify research on international students' experiences internationalization of higher education (Song & Xia, 2020).

Three sets of questions concerning the students' experiences of Minzu superdiversity were asked in this study. Although the university is not deemed prestigious compared to top universities in Beijing, we discovered that the "transformative diversification of diversity" (Vertovec, 2007) was reported as a pull factor by most students. In other words, while the students could have registered at a 'better' university, based on recommendations ('dialogical voices' such as friends or teachers) related to the university's superdiversity, they chose to do a degree at MUC. We note that the students' knowledge and awareness of the important aspect of Minzu in Chineseness appear strong when they discuss what they have learnt. They also seem to have modified many of their representations of China as a place of imagined monocentricity (Blommaert, 2015). However, the students' concrete experience of Minzu superdiversity, e.g. in terms of meeting Chinese students of different Minzu, appeared to be limited in most cases to linguistic and cultural snapshots. This might give the impression that Minzu superdiversity serves as a mere slogan in the students' narratives. As such only one student seemed to have made a conscious effort to link up with members of diverse Minzu on and off campus.

Probably the most fascinating aspect of our study is identification relating to cross-border identities. Students coming from China's bordering countries, whose facial features, physical traits and e.g. accents in Chinese make them 'look' and 'sound' Chinese, or like members of Chinese Minzu, have to face situations of misidentification through which they become themselves part of superdiversity, in the sense given to it by Ndhlovu (2015): their perceived identities lead to a lack of predictability for those they meet. For these students Minzu superdiversity serves the purpose of supporting them reflect on identity and interculturality (Holliday, 2010). One could say that their mirrored superdiversity could also trigger reflexivity of the Chinese they meet.

In terms of combining Minzu and superdiversity, we discovered that the way the students discuss Minzu appears to be synonymous with two aspects of superdiversity noted by Vertovec (2017): 'very much' Chinese diversity and the presence of 'more ethnicity'. Discussions of Minzu also demonstrate that its superdiverse characteristics could allow the students to think of China beyond 'the box' (Fanshawe & Sriskandrajah, 2010). In some rare cases, especially because of the misidentification that they experienced, Minzu as superdiversity allowed the students to note some negative aspects of their experiences in China such as discrimination and/or inequality (Vertovec, 2017).

## 8. Conclusion

This paper is part of a broader range of studies where we examine different aspects of Minzu higher education in China. This is, to our knowledge, the first paper to discuss the influence of such superdiverse institutions on international students. Placing superdiversity at the centre of analysis in a context of internationalization can allow us to complexify students' experiences and engagement with local environments. As one student puts it in his interview, "here you have to face the real China", meaning: a superdiverse China, beyond the stereotypical image of uniformity (Cheng, 2007). With this paper we call for further exploration of such contexts in order to enrich the knowledge produced about issues of e.g. intercultural awareness, tolerance and identity constructions, in research on internationalized universities.

Our study has some repercussions for both scholars and Ethnic-serving minority institutions like MUC – but also for other institutions which may be categorised as more 'homogeneous'.

First it is important for research on study abroad to expand its vision of 'locality' to correspond to the idea of superdiversity, which cannot but affect (positively but also negatively) any educational context today. Putting an end to treating 'locals' homogeneously in research on internationalization should be a priority (see Holliday, 2010).

Second international students should have the opportunity to reflect critically on locality through the lens of superdiversity in e.g. courses on interculturality to gain knowledge and analytical tools to open up their mind to its omnipresence. What is more the students should be given opportunities to meet and discuss these issues with as many different 'local' people as possible, avoiding too much compartmentalization of social interactions. As such, a context like MUC represents an ideal laboratory for such work. While they reflect on Chinese superdiversity, international students should also be equipped to transfer these reflexive skills to their own context. According to Abdallah-Preteuille (2004), seeing superdiversity in Self can also help see and accept superdiversity in the Other.

Finally, for the 'locals', there also appears to be a necessity to learn to question assumptions about facial features, physical traits and identities in order to open up to the superdiversity of the Other too and avoid misjudging – and at times 'mistreating' – them. Becoming aware of one's own superdiversity could also help 'guests' (international students) open up to seeing themselves beyond a monolith.

## Funding Information

2018 National Social Science Found (China). Research on Chinese and bilingual education in the context of cultural confidence (grant number: XMA180282).

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