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"I think it would be easier for Chinese ethnic minorities to find themselves as a minority if they go abroad": Chinese Minzu individuals' identity and the study abroad experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines identity constructions of Chinese ethnic minority (*Minzu*) individuals after study abroad. International research on the 'Chinese international student' has often treated this figure as a generic and homogeneous one. Our paper calls for taking into account students' many and varied Chinese ethnic identities in the description of the study abroad experience. Based on interviews with 13 members of different ethnic minorities from Minzu University of China, who spent time abroad as part of their studies, we analyse the way they express and construct different aspects of their identity while reminiscing about their time abroad. This university is one of the most diverse universities in the world. The study is based on a poststructuralist approach to identity and interculturality abroad. A form of dialogical discourse analysis is used to examine the respondents' identity. The results show that representatives of different ethnic groups report varied experiences of 'doing' identity abroad and upon return.

1. Introduction

Every year 600,000 Chinese students study abroad (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2017). The position of the 'Chinese international student' has been extensively – and is most certainly the most – researched internationally. Most aspects of the study abroad experience has been researched through the figure of the Chinese student: adaption to local contexts (Bodycott, 2012), intercultural learning (Bean & Boffy-Ramirez, 2017), critical thinking (Tian & Lowe, 2014), identity construction (Ye & Edwards, 2017), etc.

In his 2011 article entitled *A plea for change in research on intercultural discourses: A 'liquid' approach to the study of the acculturation of Chinese students*, Dervin analysed the way the Chinese international student has been researched in relation to identity and interculturality in the West. He discovered two important elements: 1. The students were constructed in limited, static and sometimes implicitly negative ways (they were said to be pragmatic, uncritical, rote-learning, etc.), which translated "a different psychology, cultural distance and history" (Billeter, 2000: 9), and 2. The ensuing image of the Chinese was that of a "monochromic forest" (Cheng, 2008). Dervin (2011) called for the figure of the Chinese international student to be examined by taking into account the 'gargantuan complexity' of China, beyond its usual 'imagined unicity' (Kirky, 2016: 29). At the same time, he

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called for Western scholars to be transparent about and revise their ideological constructions of the Chinese international student (Kirky, 2016).

This paper is the result of cooperation between scholars from Europe and Mainland China who specialize in intercultural and minority (Minzu) education and who wish to contribute to research on the Chinese international student beyond the usual monolithic mass of undifferentiated individuals (Yuan et al., 2020). Following Holliday (2010): 74) we wish to question the resistant "lack of belief that the non-Western Other can be complex and sophisticated just like us." Through our discussions of research on the Chinese international student, we discovered that one particular aspect had been entirely ignored: Mainland China's Minzu groups (often referred to as 'ethnic minorities' in English), which represent around 120 million individuals (in comparison: the total population of the EU is 500 million). These 'ethnic minorities' speak at least 130 different languages (Minglang Zhou, 2017: 111). In none of the studies on Chinese international students abroad that we consulted did the authors concentrate on the Minzu identity of the students and on the potential influence it might have on the topic they were researching. The Chinese international student always appears to be an undifferentiated monolith, although his/her ethnicity might go beyond the majority Han; he/she might have a first language other than Putonghua (Chinese Mandarin); he/she might have a specific religion/worldview.

In this paper we use the case of students and former students from Minzu University of China (MUC) in Beijing. This interdisciplinary university is designated for Chinese Minzus and has students from all the 56 official Minzus of China. Like all universities around the world, MUC sends about 500 students abroad every year for exchange. To our knowledge, no previous study has been published on the international mobility of these students. Since MUC is a hyper-diverse university, representing a China microcosm, where students from all parts of China live and study together, we are interested in the way MUC students reflect on identity and interculturality issues after their stays abroad.

1.1. An introduction to the notion of Minzu

China is a unitary multiethnic state. Ethnic groups are the product of an ethnic classification project started in China in 1953 and finished in 1990 (Zang, 2005: 3). There is no unified theoretical underpinning of Minzu education in China, apart from the notion of "plurality within unicity" (see Sude et al., 2020. Different terms have been used in English to refer to these different groups: Minzu, ethnic minorities, minority groups, non-Han peoples, local peoples, nationality, nationality groups (Zang, 2005: 2). In this paper we use the term *Minzu* as it avoids misperceptions and inadequate connotations contained in words like *ethnicity, minority, national* in English and other languages, as they can be politically marked in different parts of the world (see Billeter, 2014 for a discussion on translating Chinese terms into other languages).

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 8.5 % (Zang, 2016: 1). In many cases the latter are often socio-economically, culturally and ethnically different from majority Han Chinese. Minzu status appears on people's identity documents and depends on their parents' own status.

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 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. There are also five provincial-level ethnic autonomous regions: Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Tibet Autonomous Region (Sude et al., 2020).

According to Wang and Du (2018): "it is necessary to point out that ethnic minorities [Minzu] are not a group of homogenous people. The differences within ethnic minorities should not be ignored as well". It is also important to note that some Minzu minorities have different first languages on top of Putonghua, the common language of Mainland China.

In terms of education ethnic minorities can be educated in their home provinces in their first language, in Putonghua or in both languages (Leibold & Chen, 2014). Three different types of primary and secondary schools are available: mono-ethnic minority schools, mixed-ethnic minority schools, and mixed Han/ethnic minority schools (Ma, 2011). Top students from Tibet and Xinjiang can also receive their middle and high school in other provinces in Putonghua (so-called 'inland' education).

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. Minzu individuals tend to experience diversity in terms of (amongst others) language, culture, and sometimes worldviews/religions. Their identity thus tends to be situated on a continuum of Chineseness and Minzu. In this paper we are interested in how this complex identity fares in relation to study abroad.

2. Identity in study abroad

For the sociologist Z. Bauman (2004): 17), "identity is the 'loudest talk in town', the burning issue on everybody's mind and tongue". It has become central in research on study abroad since the 2000s (Dervin & Jackson, 2018).

National identity (= passport) has often been the focus in research on the identity of students abroad. This phenomenon has been described as a problematic form of 'methodological nationalism' or the use/naturalization of the Nation State as the principal and only identity marker to examine intercultural encounters (Amelina et al., 2012). Methodological nationalism represents a bias which can lead to essentialism, or the reduction of one individual to an imagined perception of a national identity (Holliday, 2010). The problematic generalization of the unique figure of the Chinese international student in research on study abroad is such an example, which ignores e.g. the diversity of Minzus in Mainland China.

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Identity has been increasingly described as an unstable process which is context- and interlocutor-dependent. Identity is thus always emergent, contradictory, and performed and thus 'inescapably diverse' (Sen, 2006: 4). Finally, identity can also lead to conflicts, unequal power relations and forms of discrimination (Sen, 2006). Stuart Hall (1990): 222) summarizes well all these characteristics when he writes: "Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside representation." As such, identity is co-constructed and performed between individuals who can (or not) choose identity markers that they wish to project with and for the other (Bauman, 2004). It is in the processes of *self-in-the-other* and *other-in-the-self* that identity is co-constructed (Gallagher, 2011: 492). These silent/noisy/violent/peaceful confrontations with the other make identity "come to life (…), identity falls asleep and silent the moment the noise of the battle dies down" (Bauman, 2004: 77).

When faced with different others during study abroad, identity comes to life for most students, who may start questioning their identity (e.g. Young, Barret, Young-Rivera, & Lovejoy, 2014). Being at first sight different from the majority, may stimulate deeper contemplation about multiple dimensions of their identities and lead to self-awareness. That is why, as a stranger abroad, the experience of a foreign student does not make sense if it is not examined within social structures that are interlocking (see Collins & Bilg, 2016). Dimensions such as gender, social class, religion, sexuality but also race and ethnicity are all social constructs that contribute to people 'doing' identity together, and in relation to larger structures of potential oppression and privilege. Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002): 324) argue: "[m]uch of transnational studies overstates the internal homogeneity and boundedness of transnational communities; they overestimate the binding power for individual action; they overlook the importance of cross-community interactions as well as the internal divisions of class, gender, religion and politics."

Researchers have concentrated on various aspects of identity and participation in study abroad research (Kinginger, 2013). For instance, Shames and Alden (2005) have examined the impact of short-term study abroad on the identity changes of students with learning disabilities and/or ADHD. Murray Brux and Fry (2010) explain that students of colour rarely participate in study abroad programmes because of financial and administrative issues. In another example, Bryant and Soria (2015) concentrate on the study abroad experience of bisexual, gay or lesbian, questioning, self-identified queer, transgender, and gender queer students (LGBTQQ). Study abroad experiences might also influence and shift students' 'habitual ego' (Wilkins 2001: 2). Zamani-Gallaher, Leon, and Lang (2015)) talk about 'study abroad as self-authorship'. For instance, a student may usually identify as shy and modify his/her representation of self after some time abroad. It is vital to note, however, that this does not happen automatically. Howarth (2002: 19) explains that 'there are limits to how far we can opt in and out of identities'. She gives the examples of skin colour and gender for which "the gaze of the other makes these identities unavoidable" (ibid.).

3. Researching Minzu, identity and study abroad

In this paper the specific case of Minzu students who studied abroad is examined. In-depth interviews with 11 students, and two lecturers who studied abroad, were organized in Chinese Mandarin and English (the interviewers and students could navigate freely between the two languages). The participants represent different cases of Minzu: a. Minzu individuals with a mother tongue other than Putonghua, b. Minzu individuals who only speak Putonghua and c. Minzu individuals who have a specific religion. Another criterion for choosing the participants was that they had been students at CMU. The interviews took place in a quiet place at a café on the MUC campus in Beijing, after the participants had been abroad. Each interview lasted for one hour. They were transcribed and the parts in Chinese were translated into English by the team. The transcripts are verbatim and were not corrected in the analytical sections. The table below gives more information about the participants (Table 1).

The students fall into three distinct cases which, we assume, might have an influence on how they discuss their identification in relation to stay abroad:

Table 1
Participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Mother Tongue	Ethnic group	Country	Length	Level of study/occupation
A	F	21	Korean	Korean	South Korea	1 year	Undergraduate
B	F	25	Putonghua	Mongolian	Ireland	1 year	Undergraduate
C	F	23	Kazakh	Kazakh	Kazakhstan	1 year	Undergraduate
D	F	24	Kazakh	Kazakh	Kazakhstan	1 year	Undergraduate
E	M	22	Putonghua	Manchu	US	4 months	Undergraduate
F	F	23	Putonghua	Manchu	Germany	1 year	Master's
G	F	25	Putonghua	Bai	South Korea	2 weeks	Master's
H	F	25	Korean	Korean	South Korea	1 year	Master's
I	F	23	Uighur	Uighur	Sweden	1 year	Master's
J	F	30	Putonghua	Manchu	US	1 year	PhD student
K	F	29	Tibetan	Tibetan	US	1 year	PhD student
L	M	40	Mongolian	Mongolian	Japan	9 years	Lecturer (has a PhD)
M	M	30	Tibetan	Tibetan	US	1 year	University teacher (has a PhD)

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1 Chinese Minzu individuals who have a mother tongue other than Putonghua, who went to a foreign country (Sweden, US, Japan)
2 Chinese Minzu individuals who have a mother tongue other than Putonghua, who went to a neighbouring country where their own language is spoken (Kazakhstan, Korea)

4. Chinese minzu individuals who speak only Putonghua (Germany, Ireland, US)

3 male participants were interviewed vs. 10 female participants. A minority of participants did not speak other languages than Putonghua (other mother tongues: Kazakh, Korean, Mongolian, Tibetan, Uighur). Four participants had spent time in the USA; three in South Korea; two in Kazakhstan; one in Germany; one in Ireland; one in Japan; one in Sweden. Except from the Mongolian participant who had spent 9 years in Japan, the others spent from 2 weeks to 1 year abroad. The length of stay abroad might influence the way they construct their identity while narrating their experience abroad (Kinginger, 2013).

During the research process, we exercised heightened self-awareness and reflexivity to better understand the complex connections between Minzu, identity and study abroad. In her 1994 article 'Working the Hyphens – Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research', Fine (1994) proposes to 'work the hyphen', or the relationships between researchers and their research participants, highlighting the interdependence between interlocutors in 'doing' identity. Three of us are Chinese researchers specialising in Minzu education at Minzu University and one of us works as a professor of multicultural education both in Finland and China. Before the interviews, and following Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012: 299), we had negotiated between us the avoidance of the following phenomena as much as possible: fighting against *objectification of our participants* through our questions and statements (turning participants into stereotypes), *decontextualisation* (detachment of our discussion with the participants from a general context of policy and socioeconomic structures), and *deauthorisation* (pretending to be objective beings) (ibid.: 300). Whenever possible, we used narrative, dialog and reflexivity with the participants to make them at ease and create a more balanced encounter (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012).

The data were analysed by means of a form of discourse analysis which places dialogism at its centre. This method allows researchers to examine marks of (inter)subjectivity in the construction of an object of discourse (here: different facets of identity in relation to study abroad and Chinese Minzus). In other words: how multiple voices are used to create and negotiate discourses of identity during the interviews. Many and varied linguistic elements are used to identify and analyse these voices such as *deictics* (markers of person, time, and space such as personal pronouns, adverbs, and verbs) but also *utterance modalities*, which can give us a clue about the attitude of the speaker towards what she/he is saying (adverbs, shifters, etc.) (Dervin, 2016). This method allowed us to identify four analytical components which form the basis of the following sections. The first section looks into an aspect of identity that has often been researched in study abroad: the links between identity and interculturality. The second section examines the changes in personality in relation to study abroad as expressed and constructed by the interview participants. The third part discusses the important aspects of differentiation and confrontation in identity-building with others. While the three previous aspects related indirectly to Minzu elements, the participants' specific Minzu identity is analysed in the last section.

5. Analysis

5.1. Revising views on interculturality

Most research on study abroad reports intercultural awareness and learning as an important outcome of study abroad (Jackson, 2018). However, this intercultural aspect can be understood in different ways by both scholars and research participants. In traditional research about study abroad, intercultural adaptation – in relation to 'national culture' (Tsai, 2011) - has been emphasised while more critical research has looked into students' shifts in the way they identify (Jackson, 2015; Li, 2015). What emerges from the analysis of the students' interviews in this section is two important aspects of interculturality as it has been problematised by many critical scholars of culturalism (i.e., culture as a simplistic explanatory force): heterogeneity within a country must be taken into account, and people across cultures share both differences and similarities (Piller, 2011; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002).

In some of our participants' discourses, one can clearly see that their stays abroad have helped them to see beyond the ideology of the 'single identity' and stereotypical images of others (Jackson, 2018). After claiming that foreigners are ignorant of China and misunderstand the Chinese, M, a Tibetan lecturer who spent time in the US, explains:

M: What I wanna say is people in different parts of the United States are really different. So, you cannot have one view, all come from all over the whole country. I just feel when I travel in Florida, people, there, are, that is not friendly… as the people live in the northeast part of America… and the people in San Francisco are different…

B is Mongolian but does not speak Mongolian. Like E, a Manchu student, she often reports in the interview not being different from the Han students, actually explaining at times that she did not even know if the other Chinese students in Ireland were (majority) Han or not – and that they did not know that she was a minority student:

B: I think it is nothing different for me. Because I speak Mandarin. When I went to Ireland, I do not know whether they are minorities, or they are Han. Because they speak Mandarin.

Interviewer 1: What about your friends there? Did they know whether you are a minority or not?

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B: They don't know.

Interviewer 1: Did you tell the Irish that you are a minority in China?

B: No. They only know that I am Chinese.

During her interview, she discusses how she changed her personality during her stay in Ireland, from 'shy' and 'afraid' to more 'open'. She also put forward some intercultural learning, through which she realized that people are similar across countries and races. The excerpt contains a typical differentialist argument about their culture and language (see Holliday, 2010):

B: Then the teacher said don't be shy, just open your mouth. There are many students from other countries in our school, and I contact and chat with them gradually. After two or three months, I was not be as shy or afraid as before. I also saw a lot of white and black people and it was quite good. I feel that everyone is the same, but there are some differences between culture and language. But in terms of human nature, people are the same.

The same student repeats her feeling at ease with different kinds of people later on during the interview by claiming that "Even after returning to China, you feel calm when you meet many people with different skin colors". In this utterance, she uses a generic 'you' that seems to give authority to her claim (see Dervin, 2016).

K, a Tibetan student who studied in New York, shares a similar shift in the way she sees people who are different from her.

K: I think more is about to open your mind to fill the multi-cultural or multi-ethnics, especially in a very small place like a campus. We may see a lot of friends will come from different places. But if you really talk with them, it's a very enjoyable experience. That helps me a lot and makes me think, like every individual is very special. And should be appreciated, and especially you should appreciate the background of that individual, like cultural and traditions, that really makes you know who you are or who you want to be. But in that time, you have to open your mind, not just always on me and myself. You have to think about others, or maybe they, me and others are same…

Although her discourse is still very much embedded in culturalism ("you should appreciate the background of that individual, like cultural and traditions"), her call for "opening your mind" seems to rely on an ideological approach that also considers similarities with the people she interacts with (see Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003). The coda of the excerpt could also appear as an interesting contradiction with what preceded.

Finally, G and F also use an ideology of sameness with others when they discuss what they had learnt from their time abroad:

G: I think when I was in China, everyone was yellow skin, so I didn't think there was too much difference. However, after going abroad, there are different races, and they feel that everyone living in the big family of Earth. We should be tolerant of each other. Everyone is no different. In fact, everyone is the same. We should also learn from each other. Just like what is now called the "community of destiny". After I came back from abroad, I felt that my vision was broadened. I feel my tolerance is stronger than before.

Unlike the previous participants, G refers to difference in terms of race, while the others had referred to cultures, languages and traditions. In this excerpt the student also makes a direct reference to a slogan related to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, "community of destiny" (officially translated as "community with a shared future"), which emphasises both sameness and difference in terms of interculturality.

For F this sameness even guided her research interests during her stay abroad. Her interests in a similar topic shared by both China and Germany, minorities, have led her to write a thesis on the topic:

F: Before I have a nationality, (No, no) I'm a human being. Before we go abroad, maybe we have many stereotypes to other country and other people. But when we get in touch with them, we found we are all human beings, we are all the same. I'm also looking for an opportunity to study abroad again, looking for some exchange projects. For myself, because I am a minority in China, so I also focus on the minority in Germany. And I did my thesis to compile the policy of the situation of minorities, between China and Germany.

This first section has demonstrated that some of our participants are able to review the way they see interculturality and thus people's identity. While heterogeneity from within is noted by some students, many of them highlight that they became aware of the similarities between them and others. However, it is interesting to note that these discourses of sameness are accompanied by the use of concepts such as *culture, race* and *traditions,* although the participants often claim that they found out that "humans are the same". This contradiction is often present in discourses of identity and interculturality in contexts of mobility encounters (see Machart, 2016).

5.2. Shifts in personality, attitudes and behaviours

In this second section, we describe how the participants discuss shifts in personality, attitudes and behaviours during and resulting from their stay abroad. As asserted before, we could find signs here of what Zamani-Gallaher et al. (2015) describe as 'study abroad as self-authorship'.

The first element that we noticed is that some participants describe changes in themselves that appear to relate to certain habits from daily life and in relation to studying. For example, F, who had ordered cold sparkling water during the interview (all other participants ordered hot water), explains that she started drinking this kind of water in Germany, while K explains drinking a lot of coffee after her stay in the USA although she used to drink tea only. Through these simple acts during the interview, the participants 'performed' transformation.

In terms of studying, some participants emphasize changes in the way they perceive their own behaviours. K, from Tibet, repeats twice that she learnt to be more generous with other students during her time in the US:

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K: And also, I like to share. If I see some good pieces of paper and book, I will share to maybe you are interested in. Before, I would not, not because I'm selfish. Before, I think maybe this isn't important, or you may not like or interested. But later I find maybe this is a good way to keep in touch, and also good to share the information.

Some participants also describe changes in the way they look and their personality. As such, C reports what her parents told her when she came back home after her one-year stay in Kazakhstan. She explains these changes by referring to the difference in food and climate between Beijing and Kazakhstan.

C: When I came home, my parents said you are whiter than before, and you are fatter and more beautiful than before. I think the reason why I change is that I eat more in Kazakhstan because the food is different from China. The weather is better than Beijing. The weather in Kazakhstan is wetter.

While C comments on the different physical aspects her parents noticed in her, D, another Chinese Kazakh girl, who spent a year in Kazakhstan, explains she had become stronger and more positive:

D: I have become more positive, because I have seen more things after. Before I went, I didn't have very high demands on myself, but after seeing the outside world, I felt higher and more positive about myself.

While G reports a similar shift in her identity, she also notes that, after coming back to China, she found refuge back into her old self:

G: Yes, I have the habit of writing down what happened. So, the same, I also became outgoing. If you don't open your mouth to ask where I can go and how I can do, like this, to ask for help, it will waste a lot of time. So you have to open your mouth to communicate. So I have no choice but to do so this. And you'll be so happy. But the case is not always like this. I am also very outgoing when I come back. Maybe about a month later, I will be back. I don't know why.

Finally, L, a lecturer who studied at MUC and who spent 9 years in Japan, reflects extensively on his personality transformation, in relation to the use of time and 'seriousness', essentialising somewhat his new identity by referring to the 'Japanese':

L: The first change was the concept of time. After studying in Japan, I became very punctual. We Mongolians in Inner Mongolia don't care much about time. For example, when we say meet at noon, that is, every minute from 12 o 'clock to 2 pm.is OK. But in Japan, when you say 12 o 'clock, you have to make an appointment and you have to be there at 11:55. After 12 o'clock means that you have broken your appointment. The second change is that Japanese people are very serious and we have learned to care about details. When I came back from Japan, the domestic traffic laws were not as strict as they are now. When we were in Japan, we followed the traffic rules very much. So when I came back to China, I would wait for the traffic lights and wear my seat belt when driving, even though others said it was not necessary. When I drink, I don't drive. My friends felt it was strange and just said 'that we used to drink and drive[1], which also doesn't matter!' All in all, I also have great changes in my daily life.

In this excerpt, the respondent uses various forms of reported speech to make his point (see Dervin, 2016). For the first argument about time, he generalises Mongolians by means of an inclusive indirect voice ("when we say meet at noon"), while the Japanese are generalised through a generic "you" ("when you say 12 o'clock"). For the second argument, L uses a direct represented quote from his friends. All these direct and indirect voices allow L to construct a dialogue between his identities (past vs. present; Japanese vs. Mongolian) (see similar phenomena in Jackson, 2015).

This section, in line with the first one, demonstrates that our Minzu participants have discovered, explored and produced varied aspects of their identity, summarized here by personality, attitudes and behaviours (Hall, 1990). While some new aspects might appear somewhat insignificant (drinking bubbly water), others seem to have been lifechanging. The fact that these students are from varied Chinese Minzus is not systematically mentioned by the participants as an explanatory force when they do so.

5.3. Differentiations and confrontations with others

According to Young, Barret, Young-Rivera and Lovejoy (2014) study abroad allows students to rethink 'us' and 'them' through meeting others. As such, identity and interculturality are constructed through encounters and confrontations with other people. In what follows we examine moments in the interviews when our respondents compare themselves to other groups, and discuss instances of confrontations.

M, a Tibetan who spent one year in the US, describes experiencing discrimination during his stay abroad. The kind of discrimination he experienced relates to different racial identities:

M: I think every Asian student, or whether students or professors, when they go to the US, they experience different levels of discrimination. And you know, and the first, I also joke with my friends, of course they discriminate at us, for example, physically, we are not giants. And they have a lot of stereotypes, and different level of discrimination.

Interviewer 1: But did you feel sometimes that you experience some form of discrimination, like explicitly or even implicitly?

M: Not really, that's explicitly. Sometimes the situation I felt discriminated, but I cannot tell.

When urged to share examples, M narrates the followings, which confirm the racial connotation ("a Black guy", "White guys"):

[1] There might be some humour and/or irony in this assertion. 'Drink and drive' is strictly forbidden by Chinese law and seriously punished (see Li, Nie, & Zhang, 2012).

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M: Yeah, during the night, when we go out, I met a couple of… One time, a black guy, I was with my friend, a Korean student. A Black tried to rob, just said give some money, with force and strong language, and we didn't give some. And then the good is that University has a police, campus police. and then they left. And one is again, at night. I think white guys rent apartment a little bit far from me. And we met some white people, with some strong, negative words. And I with my four friends and another guy, we tried to back, you know, just go here. So that's a couple of not so happy times.

These unfortunate encounters do not relate directly to Chineseness, or even Minzu, but rather to being 'Asian' versus 'White' and 'Black'. Identity thus becomes 'larger' (Bauman, 2004).

For the participants who went to countries where their first language is spoken, the encounters with others often relate to their Minzu identity. In her interview about her stay in Kazakhstan, D operates several comparisons between her as a Chinese Kazakh and others. In the first excerpt she discusses how different her experience of study abroad was, compared to that of other Chinese friends in Kazakhstan:

D: Yeah, I'll give an example. Yeah, they may learn less than us. For example, there is a spring festival in Kazakhstan and actually we celebrate also as a minority and they're at that time there is a ceremony all this kind of big ceremony in a very big park and we go together. I mean with the students who learned Russian. We go together and when they saw their dancing and singing we are familiar with the widely use it, but they just ask what's this? what's this? what's this? so familiar.

In this excerpt, she plays the role of the cultural connoisseur who can introduce 'Kazakh' culture to other Chinese students, who went to Kazakhstan to study Russian. Her status as a Chinese Minzu, who speaks Kazakh, helps her play this special part for her compatriots.

In another part of the interview D is asked about her Kazakh and Chinese identities after her time abroad. D compares and differentiates the two countries, showing her preference for China:

D: I love China more. In Kazakhstan, many are Kazakh and Russian, their thinking is relatively conservative, some people think that girls go to school, quickly married! But in China we are very open-minded and don't have to get married at the age of 24. To be honest, we went there at the age of 24 and went to school with the local sophomores. They think we're getting old. But in China we have an open mind. In Kazakhstan, after graduation, my friend got married. At the age of 24, she had almost two children. This is where they are very bad, too conservative thinking.

In this excerpt D plays the game of ingroup and outgroup, disidentifying herself with the Kazakhs, and using strong evaluative terms to refer to their 'habits' ("conservative", "bad", etc.). The comparison between Chinese and Kazakh cultures proposed by the student also reinforces a somewhat ethnocentric vision of self and other – the Chinese are referred to as being "very open-minded" (see Piller, 2010).

D also felt at times that she was mistreated for being a Chinese Kazakh by some people in Kazakhstan (those who are "conservative", see above), while at the same time remaining positive about other Kazakh individuals who are described as 'open':

D: Because some of them feel that we did not emigrate in the past, and now we just come to visit. That's what conservative people think. Sometimes some people will be very welcome, think that we used to learn knowledge is a commendable. Conservative people will feel why we did not emigrate in the past, to become a minority in China rather than in Kazakhstan as the main ethnic group. But some people are particularly open, tolerant, feel that what you have learned here must be well publicized, and encourage more people to come here to understand us.

All in all, through her (sometimes conflictual) encounters with locals and Chinese students who are not Kazakh Minzu students, the student has been able to explore different questions about who she is, and her preferences.

5.4. Construction of Minzu identity in relation to study abroad

Significant differences in the way the influence of study abroad is discussed by members of different Minzus are noticeable. In what follows we examine two types of Minzu participants: Representatives of Minzus who don't have a specific mother tongue and those who do.

Representatives of Minzus who don't have a specific mother tongue report an experience of study abroad that they compare to majority Han students abroad. When asked if the experience of study abroad had an impact on him, E, a male Manchu student, replies:

E: No, I didn't find it really hard to live in another country, perhaps because there are some other people who are similar to me. There are other Chinese people and I didn't find myself really lonely. And yes, I think I just did it really quite well.

E, who appeared to be quite confident in English during the interview, lived in a house with three other Chinese, who were all Han students. Apart from claiming that the experience made him more confident, this student does not report any shifts in the way he perceived himself as a Chinese Minzu student. He even goes as far as repeating twice during the interview that his Minzu group (which he refers to as 'nationality' in English) is similar to Han people:

E: (…) actually, as for me, I'm a Manchu, so I think this nationality is really similar to Han. I think so, just my opinion, yeah, from my experience….

E: Well, actually, as for me, I think my experience will be probably the same even if I was a majority, ethnic group. Because actually to be honest, sometimes I even regard myself as a majority people. Yes. So actually, I do agree with it, some people who

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are from minority group, a real minority group, will have different experience. (…) But as for me, I don't think they are different.

In the second excerpt, E actually compares his experience to that of what he refers to as 'a real minority group', claiming that their study abroad experience might be different from his, thus creating different categories of Chinese Minzus – from *similar to the majority* to *real minority*.

J, who is also a Manchu, studied in the US too. However, the way she speaks about what she learnt about her identity differs from E. She explains that her stay abroad helped her to realize that she is Chinese, and not just Minzu, as she believed before going abroad:

J: Before I go abroad. I just think I am an ethnic groups people and I didn't think too much about my country. But when I go abroad, I didn't think too much about it, but oh, my dear, I'm a Chinese that and I always say when you go abroad, you will like our country. Yeah, and when you are in in your own country you cannot realize that.

It is important to note that J also claimed on many occasions during the interview that her Minzu does not make her so different from Han students.

L, a lecturer and former student at MUC, represents an interesting case of what we could label as 'soft' Minzu identity before his study abroad experience, although he speaks Mongolian as his first language. Mongolian Chinese, L spent 9 years in Japan and has the longest experience amongst the students we interviewed. L explains that when he left for Japan, he did not feel specifically Mongolian but only Chinese. However, through encounters with Japanese people and their questions about his identity, he claims that he started to realize that he was a Mongolian:

L: But after I went to Japan, at first Japanese people thought my name was strange, because my name is Mongolian. The Japanese asked me why our first name is not Zhang, Wang and other Chinese-like names, and I answered that we are Mongolian. In addition, when we went there, the Japanese had done a lot of research on the Mongols, and both Tokyo University of International Studies and Osaka in Japan taught Mongolian. When we lived in the international students' dormitory, where there were many international students from China, European and American countries, we found that our diet was a bit different, I suddenly realized that I was a Mongolian, and gradually began to think I was actually a Mongolian.

In this excerpt L describes the changes in his sense of being Mongolian when confronted with questions about his identity.

When we compare the three preceding students, we notice that their relation to Minzu was different after their stay abroad: for the first student, it never really mattered and that did not change; for the second student, her Minzu identity was prevalent before study abroad and she became more aware of her Chineseness abroad; the third student experienced the contrary to the second one, having developed a stronger sense of his Minzu during his time abroad.

Students from Minzu groups who have a first language other than Putonghua report more complex identity negotiations during their stays abroad.

For example, F who belongs to the Korean minority, which is often constructed as a successful minority in China, with the lowest illiteracy rate and the highest college attendance rate (Woo-Gil, 2001), shares the complex process of identifying as a Chinese Korean during her stay in South Korea. Her situation is quite particular as she stayed with her family, who had migrated from China for work. In what follows the interviewers and F negotiate the labels used in both China and Korea to refer to her identity. When asked if she felt that she was integrated in Korea as a Chinese minority, she responded:

F: Two aspects. On the one hand, it is easy to integrate, but it is still different. At present, nationalities are South Koreans, North Koreans, and then Chinese Koreans minority will be listed separately, and then the others will be listed as outside Korean nationality, and so on. So I may be the third and fourth generation of immigrants, so staying in China for a long time is a fixed part of China. So it's easy to blend in, but there are still some subtle differences.

Interviewer 1: Do they call you the Chinese over there?

F: Yes. They know that I am Korean minority.

Interviewer 2: Do they call you Korean or Chinese?

F: They can't distinguish this concept.

Interviewer 1: But here, you are Korean.

F: Yes.

Interviewer 2: They call you Chinese in Korea.

F: Yes, I am called Chinese or Korean ethnic in South Korea. They understand that the Korean minority is Chinese.

Interviewer 1: Is this confusing you?

F: This concept is not confusing. However, when some things happen, some feelings will be confused.

In another part of the interview F uses two examples to describe the contradictions that she faces in both China and South Korea:

F: This question is not only in South Korea, but also in China. For example, when taking a taxi, the driver asked me, are you Korean? I said no, I am Chinese. Then he said, are you from North Korea? I said no, I am Korean minority. The driver said that the Korean minority is from North Korea. I said Korean is one of 56 Chinese nationalities. Then there is the fact that most of the time, it is a knotty problem in China. In China, maybe other people say that Koreans are not good, maybe my heart is not good and I feel uncomfortable. However, after going to South Korea, my nationality is the same as theirs. But, for example, when in duty-free shops, the Chinese people were especially disorderly and quarreled a lot. I am also very sad when they say Chinese people are bad. I still think I am Chinese. I haven't found an answer to this yet.

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In this excerpt, F shows that her dual identity makes her wish for the creation of positive identities from both sides, China and South Korea. Through confrontations with negative discourses about both, it is her own identity that is destabilised. The direct dialogue that she enacts with an imaginary taxi driver at the beginning of the excerpt illustrates well these confusions (see Dervin, 2016 about the use of such strategies in 'doing' identity).

In order to problematise her own 'torn apart' identity F introduces another narrative about two young German-Koreans whom she met in Seoul. Through this narrative, she compares her own experience of identification as a Korean Chinese and thus reinforces the point that she is making:

F: Then, there is a Confucius Institute in South Korea. There are such schools all over the world. Last summer vacation, Korean teachers from all over the world had a seminar in Korea, and then I went there. Because I was teaching Korean here for three years. In the trip, there were two German boys. They were born in Germany, but their parents are both Koreans and their parents immigrated to Germany. Then the World Cup was a match played by South Korea and Germany. The South Korean teacher asked the two little boys because they were the youngest, 18 years old. Just ask them what you think about Germany losing. Then they said that they actually wanted Germany to win, but they were happy when South Korea won. I think this kind of problem will haunt us all the time.

A very similar yet different phenomenon takes place in the interview with C. The student, who is Chinese Kazakh, started studying her language formally when she joined MUC. Before that, her entire education was in Putonghua and the Kazakh language was her family language. When she went to Kazakhstan for her year abroad, she realized that her language skills were not so good. On top of that she was faced with the fact that many people speak Russian in Kazakhstan, a language that she did not know. Like F in the previous excerpt she shares an anecdote about a Kazakh boy whom she had met:

C: So, sometimes, I can't express own ideals. It is difficult to communicate with others. So when I eat food or shopping, I use my mobile phone to translate. Interestingly, in Kazakhstan, one day I met a Kazakh boy. He is a Kazakh. But he doesn't speak Kazakh fluently.

Interviewer 1: Because Russian is his first language.

C: Yes. So he tried to speak Kazakh with me, so we communicated in Kazakh. Finally, he said that communicating with me in Kazakh language made him feel very excited, just like he remembered his mother language again.

Another interesting aspect that is discussed by some of the Minzu students relates to their phenotype. I, an Uighur girl, who came to Beijing for her High School 10 years before her stay abroad, first shares the confusion that she triggered in Beijing because of the way she looks:

I: I came to Beijing to attend high school in 2007.

Interviewer 2: Inland High School?

I: Yes. When I came then, my classmates asked me if I was Kazakh. When I was in college, I studied sociology at Beijing Industry University. There are very few ethnic minorities in Beijing Industry University. They asked me if I was from Russia.

She even reported that some teachers spoke to her in English because they thought that she was an international student. Interestingly when asked how people identified her abroad (Sweden was her study abroad destination), she explains:

Interviewer 1: When you were in Sweden, did they ask you the same question?

I: No.

Interviewer 1: Did they know you are Chinese?

I: Yes.

Interviewer 1: When they saw your face, they knew you were Chinese.

I: Yes.

Interviewer 1: Really?

I: Yes. I am surprised and I was happy. (…) I am especially happy that someone finally recognized my country and identity.

While, for many students, study abroad can bring misidentification (see Jackson, 2015), I appears to be delighted by the fact that people she met in Sweden knew that she was Chinese and never misidentified her. I's case is interesting as she was a so-called inland student in Beijing. When we asked her to compare her experience of coming to Beijing to study and her experience in Sweden, she clearly states that the arrival in Beijing helped her to prepare for reflecting on her identity as a Chinese Uighur. She explains that her stay in Sweden helped her to "broaden my horizon and I met different people and see the world and more diversity".

In this section, it is clear that amongst the participants classified as Minzu in China and who studied abroad, different experiences, different contexts have an influence on their identity construction as Minzu people. While for some, study abroad comforted and reinforced this identity, for others it left them indifferent or it allowed them to reinforce their Chinese identity.

6. Conclusion

Our study is one of the first to concentrate on Minzu individuals' study abroad experiences in terms of identity and interculturality. What we show is that the phenomena related to identity as reported by the participants are not as straightforward as one could imagine (see Jackson, 2018). Different Minzus can have different experiences of self and other in another country, depending on the country itself, their relation to it, the languages they can speak (mother tongues other than Putonghua included). Our study confirms that encounters, confrontations and differentiations from the people the students met abroad make them realize, negate but also reinforce certain aspects of their identity as 'special' Chinese.

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The importance of our study lays in the fact that we show that the figure of 'the Chinese international student' is a figure that needs to be questioned and revised. It is important for both Chinese and Western scholars to diversify their take on this figure and to take into account the internal diversity of the Chinese Nation in their analyses.

We thus suggest that the following aspects become part of bread and butter of research on the Chinese international student in order to make research on study abroad fairer and less generalizing, beyond methodological nationalism (see Amelina et al., 2012):

- Ethnicity
- Identification with Han-ness
- Language
- Experience within China (mobility)
- Religion/worldview.

Although our study has focused mostly on aspects of culture, ethnicity and race, it was clear in some of the excerpts that other facets of identity such as gender, religion and social class also have an influence on identity construction in relation to study abroad (Jackson, 2018). This aspect needs to be explored further in a future study.

These could help individualise analyses of study abroad experiences and to broaden analytical frameworks. Work on diversity from the Chinese context is a good example that can be used as an inspiration to examine people from other contexts ('The American student', the 'European student', etc.). It is only through diversification and fine-grained analyses of the experiences of educational movers that educators, researchers and decision-makers alike could make the study abroad experience more fruitful in terms of identity construction.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101584.

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