

The Complexity of Study Abroad: Stories from Ethnic Minority American Students in China

HANG DU
Middlebury College
hdu@middlebury.edu

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the experiences of two African American and three Chinese American college students studying in China during the 2013–2014 academic year. Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, all five students made progress in their Chinese proficiency, measured by test scores, lexical diversity, and total amount of language produced in each conversation. Qualitatively, the following themes emerged: (a) interactions with Chinese people outside the classroom, (b) how the concept of “self” was viewed by the Chinese people, (c) personality factors, and (d) the language progress. The student who did not enjoy the experience as much as the other students was ethnic Chinese with the highest level of Chinese proficiency. The explanation might be a mismatch between her ideal subject position of a successful language learner and the perceived subject position of a local Chinese person. This study provides additional evidence to show that experience abroad is complex and highly individualized. Even students from the same ethnic groups might have different experiences. Factors such as personality, prior cross-cultural experiences, language proficiency, expectations, and self-identification interact with each other in complex ways to influence the students’ experience abroad. Encouraging students to cultivate a more outgoing self in their second language (L2) might help them better take advantage of the study abroad experience.

INTRODUCTION

While study abroad for young Americans is no longer considered a “Grand Tour” for students from privileged families, as was the case decades ago (Gore, 2005), the student body that embarks on this journey is still not very diverse. For example, during the 2013–2014 academic year (the same year in which the current study was conducted), 74.3% of American students who studied abroad were White, African Americans accounted for 5.6%, and Asian/Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders accounted for 7.7% of students abroad (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2016). The lack of diversity may be why, despite the rich research conducted in different study abroad contexts, especially that examining students’ identity (for comprehensive reviews, see Block, 2007; Kinginger, 2009, 2013a, 2013b), little is known about ethnic minority students’ experience abroad.

This also applies to study abroad in China. Even though recent years have seen a surge of interest in research in this area (e.g., Diao, 2014; Du, 2013, 2015; Duff et al., 2013; He & Qin, 2017; Lee, Wu, Di, & Kinginger, 2017; Taguchi, Xiao, &

Li, 2016), few studies have addressed the experience of ethnic minority American college students in the study abroad in China context, likely because of the low numbers of ethnic minority students who study in China. The current article is a case study of the only two African Americans and three Chinese Americans who participated in my research in 2013–2014, described in the “Methods” section of this article.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The limited number of studies on ethnic minority American students abroad, especially African Americans, have painted a bleak picture. For example, the African American student, Albert, reported instances of severe racism in Spain, which lowered his motivation to study Spanish (Goldoni, 2017); the sexist treatment that the female African American student, Misheila, experienced in Spain was exacerbated by racism (Talbur & Steward, 1999); the African American student, Madeline, was treated “as a toy, an object of curiosity” in Russia, and this kind of attention “proves isolating and degrades her social status” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 65). (The names of study participants mentioned here are pseudonyms.)

Research on heritage speakers shows that they tend to be expected to be proficient speakers of the host language (e.g., Miyahira & Petrucci, 2007; Riegelhaupt & Carrasco, 2000). While little research has focused on Chinese Americans’ experience in China, there has been research on heritage learners of Korean and Japanese who studied in their ancestral homeland. The heritage learner of Korean, Daniel, reported that people in Korea expected him to be as proficient as native speakers in the use of honorifics simply because he was ethnic Korean, even though he grew up in Germany (Brown, 2013). He was corrected by native speakers when he intentionally deviated from the native norm for humorous effects, something he believed native speakers would not do to each other. The heritage Okinawan Japanese students from different countries in the Americas negotiated their unique Okinawan identity, an identity separate from simply being Japanese, when they studied in Okinawa (Miyahira & Petrucci, 2007). The only student from the United States in the study, Jennifer, did not think the local Okinawans believed that she was American and could speak English, but it did not seem to have caused her any distress. However, anecdotal evidence showed that many Chinese American students did not feel the same way in similar situations. For example, a former student of mine reported feeling inadequate or even “stupid” when talking to local Chinese people while studying in China, because they refused to believe that she was American and could not understand why her Chinese was not native. Clearly, these students could not take advantage of their “foreigner” identity to get things done, as their White counterparts could (Du, 2015).

Du (2015) was based on data collected in 2008 from 29 American college students, among whom none were African American or Chinese American. In fact, 23 of the participants (79%) self-identified as White. The study found that, overall, these students liked the fact that Chinese people were impressed by their

Chinese proficiency, and they used their distinctive “foreigner” identity to do things that even native speakers did not have the opportunity to do, for example, Gary, a musician, who was invited to play the piano at the wedding of a person he did not know simply because he was a foreigner. Therefore, the questions that guide the current research focus on ethnic minority American students, in particular, African Americans and Chinese Americans. Is the experience of African Americans and Chinese Americans studying in China similar to that of White Americans? If not, how are their experiences different? What are possible explanations for their experiences?

METHODS

The Program

The program in the study was jointly run by a liberal arts college in the northeastern United States and another U.S.-based organization. There are three locations in China, one in the northern part of the country, one in the southeast, and one in the southwest. At each location the program is hosted by a local university, and the organization and curriculum are similar. The program is designed specifically for American college students and has a language pledge requiring the students to speak only Chinese both inside and outside the classroom. Each student lives with a Chinese roommate, who is a student at the host university and agrees to speak only Chinese with the American student. Each student takes four classes and is in class 16 hours a week. The program also organizes a variety of extracurricular activities (for a more detailed description of the program and curriculum, see Du, 2013, 2015).

Participants

In all, 25 students who studied during the 2013–2014 academic year volunteered to participate. All of the students were juniors in college, from the institution that ran the program and other U.S. institutions. They had studied Chinese for 2–3 years in college. Of these 25 students, 19 studied in China for one semester, and the remaining six studied in China for the academic year. Two were African American and three were Chinese Americans; these students are the focus of the current article.

Data Collection

Before going to China and at the end of the program, each student took a computer-adaptive Chinese proficiency test created and used in the Middlebury summer Chinese school, which tested reading and grammar and gave ratings that generally aligned with the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) scale (from 3 to 10, Novice to Superior). Each student completed a predeparture questionnaire about their background, motivations for learning

Chinese, and the like, and a questionnaire at the end of the program about their language use in China. Right before the students graduated from college, about one or one and half years after their sojourn in China, all students were invited to fill out a questionnaire by email, and 15 students responded. These questionnaires were in English.

The main data for this study consist of 25- to 30-minute individual conversations in Chinese that each student had with me, a Chinese teacher originally from China, at the beginning and end of the study abroad experience, and monthly while they were in China. As a result, those conversations were roughly one month apart. All conversations were held via Skype except one in person, during one of my site visits. I visited some students during one trip and others during another trip. The conversations were fairly informal; students were encouraged to speak freely. The only exception was the final conversation, which included a list of questions drawn from previous research (see Appendix A). The conversations were in Chinese, to respect the language pledge and also because as Pavlenko (2007, p. 171) noted, “stories told in the language in which the original events took place are higher in emotional intensity and amount of detail.” Each conversation was recorded on a computer with the software Audacity. There were four recordings for each semester student and seven for each yearlong student, totaling around 60 hours. The recordings were transcribed with Chinese characters, yielding a corpus of 503,395 characters of transcribed student speech. Data also included field notes taken during my site visits.

Data Analysis

Qualitatively, the software MAXQDA was used to analyze the transcribed speech data. Standard procedures for qualitative data analysis, such as grounded theory techniques, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, were used to generate categories (e.g., Goldoni, 2017; Kinginger, 2004; Merriam, 2009; Miyahira & Petrucci, 2007; Pellegrino, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The themes reported in Du (2015) were used as starting categories: Theme 1. “Otherness (discovering and coping with their otherness; using otherness to their advantage)”; Theme 2. “Self-discovery (developing a global perspective; developing a national identity)”; and Theme 3. “Validation of self (language as a source of pride; feeling of superiority).”

Quantitatively, corpus linguistics research tools, in particular, the software AntConc (Anthony, 2014), were used to measure proficiency development in the forms of lexical diversity and total amount of speech in each conversation. Details are discussed in the “Results” section.

Results

Qualitative Results. Although each student abroad is “alone with a unique experience, an experience tailored to, by, and for that individual” (Polanyi, 1995, p. 287), it was clear soon after data analysis started that while the themes reported in Du (2015) applied to White students in the current study, most of them did not

apply to the African Americans and Chinese Americans. Instead, the following themes emerged from these minority students' narratives: Theme 1. Interactions with Chinese people outside the classroom; Theme 2. How the concept of "self" was viewed by the Chinese people; Theme 3. Personality factors; and Theme 4. Language progress. The two African Americans were Tina and Dave, and the three Chinese Americans were Amber, Rose, and Olivia (all aliases), and each came from a different U.S. college. None of them grew up speaking Mandarin at home.¹ All students studied in China for a semester except Dave, who studied for a year. Before discussing the four themes, a brief introduction of each student is in order.

African American Students: Tina and Dave

Tina: 给我水, 给我吃的, 给我一个地方可以睡觉, 我就高兴了 "Give me water, give me food, give me a place where I can sleep. Then I'll be happy" (third conversation).

Tina was from the West Coast of the United States. She also spoke Spanish. She said that being able to speak Chinese would enable her to speak to a large portion of the world's population. She did not think Chinese was difficult if one wanted to learn it. She said the best way to learn was to make Chinese friends. In college, she had many Chinese friends with whom she spent a lot of time chatting, singing, and watching Chinese movies.

Dave: 你的中文非常好, 你可以进入中国 "Your Chinese is extremely good. You can enter China" (third conversation).

Dave moved to the United States with his family from Africa when he was a child. He lived in the southern United States. During the first conversation, he did not know how to say basic words such as "water," dates (months and days), or "telephone." He said he was inspired to learn Chinese by his American professor of Chinese at his college. He said people thought he was smart when they saw him writing Chinese characters. During the first conversation, he said he wanted to study in China for a whole year because 我要我的中文, 跟中国人的中文一样 "I want my Chinese to be the same as Chinese people's."

Chinese American Students: Amber, Rose, and Olivia

Amber: 然后我吵架以后觉得:哇, 我不错, 我的中文不错 "After the quarrel I felt, wow, I'm pretty good. My Chinese is pretty good!" (third conversation).

Amber was ethnic Chinese whose parents were born in a country in Southeast Asia. She was from the West Coast of the United States. She was determined to learn Mandarin and study in China because her parents could not speak Mandarin themselves. She said her biggest change in life was not going to China, but going to college, where she met her first Black and White friends. When she was growing up, half of her friends were Asian Americans and half were Mexican Americans.

Rose: 我真爱中国, 我觉得中国适合我, 所以我很舒服 "I really love China. I think China suits me, so I'm very comfortable" (second conversation).

Rose was from the Midwest of the United States. She was born in China and adopted when she was 4 months old, which was the main reason why she wanted to study Chinese. She had been to China twice: when she traveled with her family as a high school student and, after her first year of college, when she went to China again to teach English for 2 months. Among these five students, she was the only one who had been to China before.

Olivia: 其实我发现我对这个歧视非常敏感, 会让我很, 越来越生气 “Actually I realized I was extremely sensitive to this discrimination. It would make me angrier and angrier” (third conversation).

Olivia was from the southern United States. Her family was originally from southern China, but they had been living in a Southeast Asian country (different from where Amber’s family was from) for several generations. Yet they maintained a strong Chinese identity. Her parents moved to the United States for her father’s job. Her Chinese proficiency was the highest among these five students before going to China.² Olivia said that since she was born in the United States, she did not know much about the culture of her parents’ country or Chinese culture. Therefore, she wanted to study Chinese to 了解我的文化 “understand my culture” (first conversation).

With these students’ backgrounds in mind, I will discuss the four themes in the following paragraphs.

Theme 1. Interactions With Chinese People Outside the Classroom

Most students reported that interactions with Chinese people outside the classroom, including travel, were associated with their positive feelings in China.

From early on, even before going to China, several students said they were determined to immerse themselves in the culture and interact with the local people outside the classroom, as Tina said during the second conversation, 一定要进入文化..., 我要吸收他们的文化 “One definitely should enter the culture.... I want to absorb their culture.” She followed through on her plan and participated in many activities with her roommate, including going out to eat, learning to dance the Chinese way at clubs, doing their nails, yoga, and going to movie theaters. She was pleasantly surprised that she could understand most of the dialogue in a movie. She said the best way to learn Chinese was 多接触这个文化, 这个社会, 我觉得交朋友啦, 或者看电影这样的事, 学习方法非常有用... “Have more contact with this culture, this society. I think things like making friends or watching movies are very useful study methods” (fourth conversation).

Among the 25 students who participated in the study, Dave probably had the most extensive social network with local residents. For the entire academic year in China, he studied at a coffee shop every day and made many friends there. He also found and played with a local soccer team regularly. He got along with his roommate and met new friends through his roommate; with his new friends, he ate out, went to movies, went bowling, got massages, and was not only asked to talk about the American and Chinese educational systems at a Chinese high school

but was also invited to a Chinese wedding. He reported having long philosophical conversations with taxi drivers about Chinese politics, society, and culture.

Rose also did many things with her roommate, such as going out to eat and taking a jazz dance class off campus. Her advice for future students was, 不是一直学习, 真的在这里我们有机会出去看别的地方, 所以, 他们应该出去玩, 真的跟中国人说话, 就是更经历中国 “They shouldn’t only study. Really, here we have the opportunity to go out, to see other places, so they should go out, to have fun, to really talk to Chinese people, to experience China more” (fourth conversation).

Theme 2. How the concept of “self” was viewed by the Chinese people

Whether they looked like ethnic Chinese or not, all the students except Olivia reported that Chinese people overall viewed them positively; if there were problems, they tried to find explanations or strategies to deal with them. Olivia, on the other hand, reported being “discriminated against” because she looked like a local Chinese person.

Tina’s prior cross-cultural experience might have helped her deal with unwanted attention. When asked if people in the street would stare at her, she said, 有很多, 他们都想摸我的头发, 摸我的辫子, 他们觉得他们从来没看到, 一个, 那么漂亮的黑人, 女人, 开玩笑, 开玩笑 “There were many; they all wanted to touch my hair, my braids. They thought that they had never seen a, such a pretty Black person, woman. Just kidding, just kidding” (second conversation). She said some Chinese people did not believe her when she said she was American. They asked if she was from Africa. In response to the question whether the unwanted attention made her feel uncomfortable, she said, 我没有那么不舒服的感觉, 因为我觉得我已经习惯了, 因为我高中的时候去意大利留学, 一个小城市, 很小的城市, 所以他们不太习惯看到外国人, 所以他们看到我的时候一直在看我, 所以我觉得, 已经习惯了 “I didn’t feel that uncomfortable, because I was already used to it. Because I went to study in Italy during high school, in a small city, a very small city. So they were not very used to seeing foreigners, so when they saw me they kept staring at me. Therefore I think, I’m already used to it.” She attributed such behavior to the lack of international knowledge and American media because most Americans featured in American media were White. 所以他们会觉得哦白人就是美国只有白人, 所以他们看到我的时候, 就会觉得你不是美国人 “Therefore they would think, oh there were only White people in the United States. So when they saw me, they would think I was not American” (fourth conversation).

The only time Dave expressed feeling uncomfortable being a Black person was after his research in an “Africa Town” in southern China during winter break, where he learned about the discrimination against people from Africa by the local Chinese people there: 我可能不要在中国生活, 因为这样的情况让我非常不舒服... 我觉得, 因为我知道, 中国的社会, 真的不接受黑人 “I probably won’t live in China because such situations made me very uncomfortable.... I think, because I know, Chinese society, really doesn’t accept Black people.” He contrasted that

with his aspirations in the United States, where he still cherished his American dream: 我, 移民到美国, 我的家庭没有钱, 可是我有机会去一个, 真不错的, 的大学, 有机会来中国, 可能有机会, 参加美国的, 啊外交家然后, 代表美国政府, 我知道没有很多国家可以这样做 “I immigrated to the United States. My family has no money, but I have the opportunity to go to a really good college. I have the opportunity to come to China. I probably have the opportunity to join American [sic], (become a) diplomat, and then represent American government. I know people cannot do this in many countries” (sixth conversation).

When Amber was asked how people reacted to her appearance and her Chinese, she said people did not think she looked Chinese: 哦你是混血的? 你看起来像亚洲人, 对。然后我讲中文的时候他们还是很吃惊, 他们说: 哦, 你怎么知道讲中文, 那些 ““Oh, are you interracial? You look like Asian.” Right. Then when I spoke Chinese, they were still very surprised. They said, ‘Oh, how come you can speak Chinese?’ things like that” (fourth conversation). She was glad during a trip that an ice cream vendor charged her the price for the local people while charging her foreign-looking friends twice the price. She said her family was even more traditional than the Chinese people she met in China. She was taught not to waste a single grain of rice when she was growing up, but she said she saw many people in China waste food at restaurants.

Rose thought it was an opportunity to tell her story when Chinese people realized her Chinese was not native: 他们当然觉得我是中国人, 可是我说几个句子以后, 他们可能觉得我不, 他们说, 哦, 你是哪里人, 你是韩国人吗? 我说哦不是, 然后我得解释我是在中国出生的, 可是在美国长大的, 有时候他们很吃惊, 对。可是没事, 因为, 我现在我不介意, 因为很多人已经问了我 “Of course they thought I was Chinese, but after I had said a few sentences, they probably thought I was not. They said, ‘Oh, where are you from? Are you Korean?’ I said, ‘No.’ Then I had to explain that I was born in China, but I grew up in the United States. Sometimes they were very surprised. Right. But, no problem. I don’t mind now, because many people have asked me” (second conversation). I told her that I once had a student who was also adopted from China and studied Chinese in college. But studying abroad in China was a traumatic experience for her because people asked why she looked Chinese but did not speak good Chinese, which hurt her self-esteem and made her sad. In response, Rose said, 我不是难过, 我觉得, 很好, 真的, 有的时候很好笑, 因为, 不知道为什么, 可是我不介意 “I’m not sad. I feel pretty good. Really. Sometimes it’s funny, because, don’t know why, but I don’t mind” (second conversation). When asked if she was Chinese, she said, 只是有一部分。很大部分是美国人, 但是也有一部分是中国人 “Only a part. Most parts are American, but I also have a part that’s Chinese” (fourth conversation).

Olivia’s story was very different. She voiced the concern of being 歧视 “discriminated against” even before going to China. She said some Chinese American students who had studied in China before her had warned her that there would be discrimination against her in China if her Chinese was not native. She also experienced this in the United States when the mother of a Chinese American classmate seemed to be less impressed by her Chinese than by her non-Chinese classmate’s. Therefore, she said, 我有点儿紧张因为, 因为我可能有, 那个歧视

的经历 “I’m a little nervous because I probably will experience discrimination” (first conversation).

During the second conversation, Olivia said she was okay because when she went out, nobody bothered her by asking to take pictures with her. However, when asked about discrimination during the third conversation, she said, 有, 有, 其实我发现我对这个歧视非常敏感。会让我很, 越来越生气 “Yes, yes, Actually I realized I was extremely sensitive to this discrimination. It would make me angrier and angrier.” She said each time she was with non-Chinese classmates from the program, the local Chinese would praise her classmates’ Chinese and ask her for confirmation, clearly thinking that she was their local Chinese friend. She said she had to say “yes.” Once at a restaurant with a classmate and his parents, the server gave her vinegar as they would a Chinese person, but gave the non-Chinese people soy sauce, 因为他以为我是中国人会, 可是, 额, 对。我知道中国人可是他们对, 对这些情况不了解或者以为我就是个中国人因为我的外表跟中国人一样, 可是还让我一点儿, 就是, 让我想念美国的多种族的情况, ... 可是在美国比较开放, 所以, 我知道我不应该生中国人的气, 可是, 我还很, 我还很... “Because she/he thought I was Chinese, but, eh, right. I know Chinese people are not familiar with these things or thought because I looked like Chinese, therefore I was Chinese. But it made me feel a little, it made me miss the American multiracial situation ... but in the United States it was more open, so I know I shouldn’t be angry at Chinese people, but I was still very, very [angry].”

When I said that some students were actually happy to be mistaken for a local person because they thought their Chinese was so good that they could pass as a native speaker, Olivia said that was not the case with her. She could not accept the fact that because she looked like a local Chinese person, people refused to believe that she was American. Another traumatic experience was a visit to a local elementary school as part of a class: 那个小孩子都一直, 不理我, 他只要跟, 那个其他的, 其他的学生, 她是一个白人, 跟她说话, 让我, 几乎哭 “The kids all ignored me. They only wanted to talk to the other student. She is White. It almost made me cry.”

During the fourth conversation, Olivia admitted that she did not interact with Chinese people as much as she would have liked partly due to her introverted personality, but she went on to say 还有, 可能是, 不只是跟我的性格有关, 可能跟我的, 对中国人的观念有关, 因为我觉得他们对我, 有偏就是偏见 “Also, perhaps, not just my personality. Perhaps it has something to do with my view of the Chinese people, because I think they have prejudice against me.” She said that when Chinese people saw her other classmates, they knew they were foreigners right away and wanted to talk to them, but 因为我跟所有的中国人, 看起来差不多一样, 所以我不知道怎么, 开始跟他们说话 “Because I look like all the Chinese people, I don’t know how to begin talking to them.” She then said what she experienced was perhaps not 歧视 “discrimination,” but 偏见 “prejudice,” because she looked like Chinese people. Therefore, she reiterated what she had said before: that she missed the United States; because of the multiracial and multiethnic situation in the United States, people there reacted better to minorities than the Chinese people did.

Theme 3. Personality Factors

The students' personalities could help explain, at least partially, how they felt about their experiences in China.³ It seems that students who were outgoing, relaxed, and resilient, and who had a good sense of humor had more positive experiences.

Tina had a great sense of humor and said she did not need much in life. 我觉得我太放松了, 没有很多事情可以影响我 “I think I'm too relaxed. Not many things can affect me” (third conversation). I also witnessed that with my own eyes. When I was visiting the program, I saw her joking with the staff in the program office all the time, and I could tell she was there from her distinctive laughter at the end of the hallway. She had no problem joking at her own expense. I went on a field trip organized by the program to an organic farm with some students, roommates, and teachers. It was a warm and sunny day. We were waiting outside for someone to show us around the farm. A teacher took out an umbrella and opened it over her head. Tina ran over to that teacher and stood under the umbrella, saying with loud laughter, “I don't want to get tanned!” It was clear that everyone else felt uncomfortable; nobody laughed with her, but I saw several people turn around and try to suppress smiles. 常常开玩笑, 不分我的玩笑和我的认真 “I often joke around. You can't tell whether I'm joking or being serious” (third conversation). She said it was not difficult for her to enter another society, because 给我水, 给我吃的, 给我一个地方可以睡觉, 我就高兴了 “Give me water, give me food, give me a place where I can sleep. Then I'll be happy” (third conversation).

Dave's laid-back personality and good sense of humor helped him deal with different situations. For example, he laughed as he recounted embarrassing stories about mishearing prices of things. We had a conversation about happiness during the sixth conversation. He said he was very happy, because 我决定我应该快乐。我觉得快乐跟, 我的环境, 没关系, 对我来说, 虽然可以有很大的压力, 或者, 你的成绩不好, 或者, 别的人让你很生气, 可是我已经决定我应该快乐 “I have decided that I should be happy. I think happiness has nothing to do with my environment. For me, even though there might be a lot of pressure, or your grades are not good, or other people made you angry, but I have decided that I should be happy.”

Amber was outgoing, positive, and resilient. Her worst experience was a bike accident during a trip over a break. She was riding a bicycle with some friends on the street in another city. Traffic was heavy. She was pushed out of the bike lane into the lane for cars. As a result, her bike hit a car and she was thrown to the ground. The driver of the car said she had damaged his car and forced her and her friends to go to a repair shop for an estimate for repairs. When she and her friends did not have enough money, he forced them to go back to their hotel to get the remaining money. He claimed that he was a policeman and said if he could not get his money, he would not let them leave the city. Amber ended up giving him all the money he wanted but said to him angrily, 你是一个警察, 所以你应该知道一个好人是怎么样的 “You are a policeman, therefore, you should know what a good person should be like.” After telling me the story, her conclusion was 但是我觉得我学了很多, 然后我吵架以后觉得:哇, 我不错, 我的中文不错 “But I

felt I had learned a lot. After the quarrel I felt, wow, I'm pretty good. My Chinese is pretty good!" (third conversation).

My impression of Olivia was that she was very sensitive, and she admitted that 我比较, 有点儿害羞 "I'm very, a little shy." Perhaps partly because of that, partly because of the perceived "discrimination," her experience in China deteriorated in the second half of the semester. Her friends from college were studying in a different city. Her roommate was rarely in their room, and she did not make any friends with anybody else. She said she rarely spoke during the second half of the semester, and 常常是我一个人 "I'm often by myself" (fourth conversation).

Theme 4. Language Progress

Whether the students reported being happy or not in China, they all said they had made progress in their Chinese proficiency and were happy about that. The following are two examples.

Dave consistently remarked that he was happy with his Chinese progress and that the local people were impressed by his Chinese. As our monthly conversations progressed, I could evaluate the progress he made because the topics that he was able to discuss got more and more complicated and nuanced. When he was coming back from out of the country at the end of a break, he had some trouble convincing the customs officer that he was holding his own passport because he had lost a lot of weight in China and no longer resembled his passport photo. After some deliberation, the officers said, 你的中文非常好, 你可以进入中国 "Your Chinese is extremely good. You can enter China" (third conversation).

Amber was also proud of the Chinese progress she made in China. During the third conversation, she talked about traveling with two friends from the program to a famous tourist attraction. Once an innkeeper found out that they could speak Chinese, the innkeeper suggested that they travel with nine other foreign tourists, who could not speak Chinese. She found her Chinese really improved, because having to translate constantly kept her "on her toes."

Quantitative Results

Although a comprehensive report of the students' language development is beyond the scope the current article, [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) provide some data to support the students' own evaluations that they had made progress in their Chinese proficiency. These measures are lexical diversity and total amount of speech in each conversation, and pre- and post-proficiency test scores. Lexical diversity is the total number of unique characters in each conversation. Higher numbers mean more unique characters were used, which in turn means that a larger vocabulary was used and the topics discussed were more diverse. Total amount of speech is the total number of characters in each transcription. The higher the number, the more the student talked.

I visited the three Chinese Americans at the end of the semester, so the last conversation was in person. It is clear from [Table 1](#) that the overall trend, especially

TABLE 1. *Proficiency Progress of the Three Chinese American Students*

Time	Amber				Rose				Olivia			
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T1	T2	T3	T4	T1	T2	T3	T4
Lexical Diversity	204	349	431	479	257	367	365	410	417	525	520	512
Total Amount of speech	1,353	2,814	4,196	4,775	1,691	2,921	3,166	3,947	3,631	3,972	4,514	6,012
Test scores	?–8.8*				6.4–8.8				9.2–9.7			

Note: Amber did not take the pretest.

TABLE 2. *Proficiency Progress of the Two African American Students*

Time	Tina				Dave						
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7
Lexical Diversity	338	414	495	447	285	345	382	408	440	515	467
Total Amount of speech	2,653	3,306	5,309	3,929	2,240	3,733	3,272	4,549	5,980	6,936	5,421
Test scores	?–9.1 ^a				3 to 6.8 to 8.9 ^b						

Notes. (a) Tina did not take the pretest. (b) Dave took the test three times.

for Amber and Rose, was that their lexical diversity and total amount of speech increased steadily from T1 to T2 to T3 to T4, and Rose’s and Olivia’s computer test scores went up from the pretest to the posttest.

As Table 2 shows, lexical diversity and total amount of speech also increased steadily from T1 to T2, to T3 for Tina, and to T4, T5, and T6 for Dave. It is interesting that for both students, these measures were the highest in the penultimate conversation (T3 for Amber and T6 for Dave), which was done in person. Talking in person seemed to have generated more speech that involved a larger vocabulary.⁴ The reason is not clear, and would be an interesting question for further research.

DISCUSSION

An additional challenge for negotiating a subject position during study abroad—Is being able to “blend in” always desirable?

Unlike some students who did not look like the locals but wanted to blend in during study abroad, such as some students in Talburt and Steward (1999), the ability to blend in seamlessly seemed to be a problem for some students in this study, probably because it represented a subject position that was not desirable. For example, Olivia was able to blend in both in appearance and in language proficiency, but that was not a positive experience for her. The 歧视 “discrimination” or 偏见 “prejudice” that Olivia reported experiencing did not seem to be what her friends had warned her about before going to China, namely, that Chinese

people would treat her with less respect due to her lack of native proficiency in the language. On the contrary, because of her high Chinese proficiency, most people had no reason to believe that she was not a local person, especially in casual interactions. While a Korean student in this study considered being mistakenly identified as a local Chinese person as his highest achievement in China, clearly that was not the case with Olivia. She was bothered by the fact that Chinese people praised her non-Chinese friends' Chinese proficiency. To make it worse for her, they often sought confirmation from her, believing that she was these students' local Chinese friend. It seemed that she wanted recognition for the hard work that she had put into achieving the level of Chinese proficiency that her non-Chinese classmates had achieved.

That, however, might not be the whole story. The fact that she was bothered that Chinese people refused to believe that she was American suggests that her American identity was very important to her. As the only student among these five who said she missed the United States while in China, the reason that she gave was that unlike the United States, China lacked 多种族的情况 "multiethnic situation." This seems to suggest that she missed her identity not only as an American but also as an American who belonged to an ethnic minority.

According to feminist poststructuralist theory, a person's identity is not static: "The subject positions that a person takes up within a particular discourse are open to contestation: While a person may be positioned in a particular way within a given discourse, the person might resist the subject position" (Norton, 2000, p. 127). This might be true in Olivia's case. From what she said about her family background, she did not know much about the culture of her parents' adopted country in Southeast Asia because they maintained a strong Chinese identity. She also did not know much about her Chinese heritage because she was born and grew up in the United States, but even though she was an American, other Americans still asked her, "Really, where are you from?" and would continue pressing her until she named the Southeast Asian country where her parents were from, even though she knew little about that country. It seemed that her identity negotiation even in her native country was rather fluid. It is interesting that her motivation for studying Chinese was to know "her culture." But once she was in China and was completely immersed in the culture and treated as a local Chinese person, she rejected that subject position. It seemed that her desired subject position in China was an American who studied hard to achieve the high level of Chinese that she had achieved. The mismatch between this ideal subject position and the perception that she was a local person seemed to be the source of her unhappiness in China. On top of that, her introverted and shy personality did not help her interact with the local people as much as she would have liked.

Personality—Extroversion Over Introversion?

While the belief that an individual's personality traits are static and fixed, as suggested in early second language acquisition (SLA) research, has been replaced by the idea that they are to a large extent socially constructed (e.g., Norton, 2000),

this study seems to suggest that all things being equal, personality factors seemed to have played an important role in whether these five students reported having positive experiences in China. From my interactions with them, I felt that Tina and Amber were outgoing and extroverted. That made it easier for them to talk to people outside the classroom and make friends. They also used their resilience to make the best of bad situations. By contrast, Olivia admitted that her shy and introverted personality was one reason why she had trouble interacting with Chinese people. Dave and Rose were less extroverted than Tina and Amber but came across as being calm and even-tempered. Their prior cross-cultural experience might have helped them cope with different situations in China.

Prior Cross-Cultural Experience—The More the Better?

Wilkinson (1998) believed that one reason the Cambodian American student, Molise, in her study had positive experiences studying in France was because she had had rich cross-cultural experiences prior to her sojourn to France. Similarly, Dave, Amber, and Tina had also had extensive cross-cultural experiences before going to China. Dave moved to the United States from Africa when he was a child. He still strongly identified with Africans, and his best friend in college was Korean. Amber grew up in the West Coast with other Asians and Hispanics. Tina also grew up in the West Coast with a lot of racial and ethnic diversity, and she had studied in Italy during high school. Rose did not have experiences like these, but she was the only student among these five who had been to China before this trip. These facts could partially explain why their experiences in China were more positive than that of Olivia, who grew up in a southern state with less diversity and had never been to China before. However, although Olivia was not happy in China, she still made progress in her Chinese proficiency.

Language Proficiency—Did All Students Make Progress?

Studies have focused on students of all levels of proficiency before going abroad (from beginning to advanced), and the general consensus is that students at lower levels saw more discernible progress in their language proficiency than higher-level students, at least measured by ACTFL's Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI; for a comprehensive review, see Kinginger, 2009). This is true in Dave's case. As Table 2 shows, Dave began with a score of 3 on the pretest and progressed to a 6.8 after one semester and 8.9 at the end of the second semester, which represents the largest gain in the group. Interestingly, Olivia also made progress in her language proficiency. For example, her test score also went up from the before-departure score of 9.2 to 9.7 at the end of the program, one of the highest among all the 25 participants, despite having one of the highest proficiencies before going to China and her unhappiness in China, including reports of having limited interactions with Chinese people outside the classroom. This suggests that she must have benefitted from what she learned in class and from the interactions that she had with Chinese people in the activities organized by her program. This

supports Kinginger's (2009) suggestion that study abroad programs themselves and the classes in those programs should be studied more.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study seem to suggest that personality might have played an important role in these students' self-reported experiences in China. Recent research has confirmed many bilingual and multilingual individuals' claims that they had different personalities associated with their different languages (e.g., Koven, 2007; Veltkamp, Recio, Jacobs, & Conrad, 2012). An intriguing suggestion is that while certain core personality traits such as introversion and extroversion associated with the first language (L1) might not be easy to change, language teachers might be able to encourage students to develop a more outgoing and adventurous self in the second language (L2), so that they can take advantage of what those traits can bring to them during study abroad. In other words, although students like Olivia might be introverts, they can be encouraged to cultivate an outgoing self in the target language and to be willing to take chances in the L2 abroad, such as initiating conversations with the local people.

Prior cross-cultural experience also seems to be helpful, although not all students have the opportunity to have such experiences before going abroad. Such students should be encouraged to find opportunities to learn about different cultures by taking classes and participating in cultural events at their home institutions. Comprehensive predeparture orientations that eschew dependence on stereotypes would also be helpful.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The minority students in this study made progress in their language proficiency whether they were happy in China or not. This study offered additional evidence to show that the experience abroad is complex and highly individualized. Even students from the same ethnic groups might have different experiences. Several factors, such as personality, prior cross-cultural experiences, language proficiency, expectations, and self-identification, interact with each other in complex ways in determining the students' experience in China. One possible way to help students benefit more from the study abroad experience is to help them to cultivate a more outgoing and extroverted self in the target language.

The limitations of the current study are obvious. It was conducted in a particular program during a particular academic year with a particular group of students. The five students who were the focus of the study were unique individuals with their own backgrounds, personalities, expectations, and aspirations, among other things. Their experiences might not be generalizable to other students in China or in other contexts. Moreover, the fact that I am a Chinese teacher originally from China might have influenced their decisions as to what feelings and experiences to share or not to share with me. Finally, their language proficiency might also have limited their abilities to fully express themselves in nuanced ways.

For future research, students from more diverse backgrounds, not just ethnic but also other kinds of diversity such as socioeconomic, should be studied. Finally, as Kinginger (2009) pointed out, the local people's voices should be heard, too, as has been done in Lee et al. (2017).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the students for their participation in this study and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

NOTES

1. In this article, the terms "Chinese" and "Mandarin" (Modern Standard Chinese), which was what the students studied in China, are used interchangeably.
2. While no official OPI was given to the students, based on my extensive training in the OPI, I think Olivia's oral proficiency before going to China was already in the "Advanced" range, which was confirmed by her computer test score (9.2, Advanced Low-Mid).
3. Although my interactions with the students were limited to our four or seven monthly individual conversations and one site visit, I was able to learn a lot about their personalities, from what stories they told me and how they told them, and from my interactions with and observations of them in and outside the classroom during the site visit. For example, from our Skype conversations I got the impression that Amber was very outgoing. That was why I was not entirely surprised that she greeted me with a hug when we met each other for the first time during my site visit.
4. The reason is not clear and would be an interesting question for future research.

REFERENCES

- Anthony, L. (2014). AntConc (3.4.3m) [computer software]. Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University. Retrieved from <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/>
- Block, D. (2007). *Second language identities*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Brown, L. (2013). Identity and honorifics use in Korean study abroad. In C. Kinginger (Ed.), *Social and cultural aspects of language learning in study abroad* (pp. 269–298). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Diao, W. (2014). Peer socialization into gendered L2 Mandarin practices in a study abroad context: Talk in the dorm. *Applied Linguistics*, 37(5), 599–620. doi:10.1093/applin/amu053
- Du, H. (2013). The development of Chinese fluency during study abroad in China. *Modern Language Journal*, 97, 131–143.
- Du, H. (2015). American college students studying abroad in China: Language, identity, and self-presentation. *Foreign Language Annals*, 48(2), 250–266.
- Duff, P., Anderson, T., Ilnyckyj, R., VanGaya, E., Wang, R. T., & Yates, E. (2013). *Learning Chinese linguistic, sociocultural, and narrative perspectives*. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Farrugia, C., & Bhandari, R. (2016). *Open doors 2015: Report on international educational exchange*. New York, NY: Institute for International Education.
- Goldoni, F. (2017). Race, ethnicity, class and identity: Implications for study abroad. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 16(5), 328–341. doi: 10.1080/15348458.2017.1350922
- Gore, J. (2005). *Dominant beliefs and alternative voices: Discourse, belief, and gender in American study abroad*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- He, Y., & Qin, X. (2017). Internship experience in China: A pilot study. *Foreign Language Annals*, 50, 57–70.
- Kinginger, C. (2004). Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning and identity reconstruction. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 219–242). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Kinginger, C. (2009). *Language learning and study abroad: A critical reading of research*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave/Macmillan.

- Kinginger, C. (2013a). Identity and language learning in study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 46(3), 339–358.
- Kinginger, C. (2013b) (Ed.). *Social and cultural aspects of language learning in study abroad*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Koven, M. (2007). *Selves in two languages: Bilinguals' verbal enactments of identity in French and Portuguese*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Lee, S., Wu, Q., Di, C., & Kinginger, C. (2017). Learning to eat politely at the Chinese homestay dinner table: Two contrasting case studies. *Foreign Language Annals*, 50(1), 135–158.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miyahira, K., & Petrucci, P. (2007). Going home to Okinawa: Perspectives of heritage language speakers studying in the ancestral homeland. In M. Mantero (Ed.), *Identity and second language learning: Culture, inquiry, and dialogic activity in educational contexts* (pp. 257–282). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
- Pavlenko, A. (2007). Autobiographic narratives as data in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(2), 163–188.
- Pellegrino, V. A. (2005). *Study abroad and second language use: Constructing the self*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Polanyi, L. (1995). Language learning and living abroad: Stories from the field. In B. F. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 271–291). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Riegelhaupt, F., & Carrasco, R. C. (2000). Mexico host family reactions to a bilingual Chicana teacher in Mexico: A case study of language and culture clash. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 24, 333–349.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Taguchi, N., Xiao, F., & Li, S. (2016). Effects of intercultural competence and social contact on speech act production in a Chinese study abroad context. *Modern Language Journal*, 100(4), 775–796.
- Talbut, S., & Steward, M. (1999). What's the subject of study abroad? Race, gender, and "living culture." *Modern Language Journal*, 83(2), 163–175.
- Veltkamp, G., Recio, G., Jacobs, A. M., & Conrad, M. (2012). Is personality modulated by language? *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 17(4), 496–504.
- Wilkinson, S. (1998). On the nature of immersion during study abroad: Some participants' perspectives. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 4, 121–138.

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONS FOR THE LAST CONVERSATION

1. 你觉得这学期在中国学习学中文最好的办法是什么?为什么?(In your opinion, what was the best way to learn Chinese in China this semester? Why?)
2. 在中国最好的经历是什么?(What was your best experience in China?)
3. 在中国最不好的经历是什么?(What was your worst experience in China?)
4. 这个学期结束以后做什么?什么时候回家?(What are you going to do after this semester? When are you going home?)
5. 跟来中国以前相比,你对中国的看法,什么改变了?什么没改变?为什么?(Compared to your views about China before coming to China, what have changed and what haven't changed? Why?)
6. 在中国学中文跟在你自己的大学学中文,有什么相同的地方,有什么不同的地方?(Compared to studying Chinese at your home institution, what aspects are similar, and what aspects are different?)
7. 你觉得课怎么样?老师给机会表达你自己的看法吗?给的成绩公平吗?课对提高你的中文水平有帮助吗?有什么样的帮助?(How did you like the classes? Did the teachers give you opportunities to express your opinions? Were grades fair? Did the classes help you improve your Chinese proficiency? How were they helpful?)

8. 你什么学中文? 为什么来中国? (Why do you study Chinese? Why did you come to China?)
9. 来中国值得不值得? 满意吗? 失望吗? (Was study in China worthwhile? Were you satisfied? Were you disappointed?)
10. 回美国以后还会继续学中文吗? 以后打算用中文做什么? 以后还会来中国吗? (Are you going to continue studying Chinese after you've returned to the United States? What are you going to do with your Chinese? Are you coming to China again in the future?)
11. 回美国以后, 如果没来过中国的人问你, “中国怎么样” 你说什么? (After returning to the United States, if people who have never been to China ask you, “How is China?” what will you say?)
12. 对自己的看法有没有变化? (Have your views about yourself changed?)
13. 对美国的看法有没有变化? (Have your views about the United States changed?)
14. 中文有进步吗? 在那些方面? 你是怎么知道的? 在哪些方面还需要改善 (Have you made progress in your Chinese? In which areas? How do you know? Which areas still need improvement?)
15. 你给明年来中国的学生有什么建议? 应该做什么? 不应该做什么? (What suggestions do you have for students who are coming to China next year? What should they do? What shouldn't they do?)