

The Multiple Forces Behind Chinese Students' Self-segregation and How We May Counter Them

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Abstract:

With the internationalization of Higher Education in Canada, universities have been striving to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for international students. However, sometimes their efforts fall short due to a lack of deep understanding of the international student body. This study focuses on one particular international student group – students from mainland China - and aims to uncover some of the crucial reasons behind the widely reported self-segregation of Chinese students (Cheng & Erben, 2011). It sets to understand why many students from mainland China feel offended and turned off by cross-national communications with students from the host nation (Dewan, 2008). I employed various frameworks to understand the findings from the study, including host nation hospitality, social psychology and group identity, and the impact of colonial mentality and Chinese nationalism. The goal of the study is to shed light on strategies educators may employ to help mitigate the self-segregation pattern among Chinese international students and encourage more inclusive learning environments and communities.

Key Words:

Chinese international students, cross-national communication, self-segregation, internationalization of higher education, inclusive learning community.

Introduction

In the Fall of 2004 I left China to pursue graduate studies in the United States. I was at the tail end of a generation of mainland Chinese students who had toiled through the high-pressure, borderline-draconian education system in China, and jostled for the few spots at reputable graduate schools in the United States. It was still an era where mainland Chinese students, with merely an admission letter and insufficient scholarship funding, were frequently rejected student visas to study abroad. With a full scholarship, I counted myself among the most fortunate. Once on U.S. soil, alone and without family and friends, I wasted no time in assimilating myself into the new culture. Uncritical

assimilation, under the pressure of the “melting pot” ideology, led to many dark moments for me. When a new identity eventually emerged and took hold firmly, I knew it was time to critically examine that arduous journey. Meanwhile, as a faculty member at a large Canadian university, I saw the landscape of Chinese international students changing drastically since I left China.

Due to China's economic boom in the recent decades, a record-number of middle-class Chinese families are sending their children abroad for a Western education (ICEF, 2016). According to Chinese state council statistics, 544,500 Chinese students studied overseas in 2016, among which, 90% had no financial support (i.e. scholarships) to cover their tuition fees (Xinhua, 2017). Long gone are the days when only top-tier Chinese students with ample scholarships could afford to study in North America. Nowadays there is a large variation in learning abilities among Chinese international students. Moreover, unlike my personal story of assimilation, many articles have been written on the tendency among Chinese students to “self-segregate”, although most of these articles reported observations made from the United States (Cheng & Erben, 2011; Cui, 2013; Pestoknik, 2015; The Other, 2017; Hail, 2015).

During the 2016-17 academic year, I conducted a study to understand the self-segregation tendency among overseas Chinese students at my university. I first set out to understand whether Chinese students indeed self-segregate on Canadian campuses. Following that question, I asked two other questions:

1. To the extent that they did self-segregate, what factors had driven them to self-segregation?
2. What are some strategies and tactics towards desegregation?

Research Method

To answer these questions, I started with an extensive literature review in multiple fields including higher education, sociology, psychology, cultural and ethnic studies. I also conducted guided and open-ended interviews with students from mainland China. I solicited interviewees by sending invitation emails to approximately 100 students and authorized them to forward the email to their Chinese friends. Among the twenty-five respondents who agreed to be interviewed, fourteen are current undergraduate students and six are graduate students at my university. Five others are working professionals in Canada who have graduated from four other Canadian universities (Simon Fraser, University of Waterloo, University of Victoria, University of Calgary) within the last five years. Interviews were forty-five minutes to one hour long. The interviewees were given the option of either speaking to me directly or typing their answers in a computer near my office. I provided the latter option because certain questions could be perceived by some as too sensitive to answer in person. Interviewees were also allowed to provide answers in either English or Chinese. Nine interviewees provided most of their answers in Chinese.

My interviewees appear to constitute an outward-looking group. Fourteen of them (56%) reported that they wanted to permanently stay in North America. The remaining group wanted to pursue advanced studies and/or accumulate a few years of working

experiences before returning to China. No one was interested in leaving for China immediately after completing their current studies.

Reported Self-Segregation

Despite their long-term plans in North America, interviewees showed strong signs of self-segregation in their responses. Among the twenty-five interviewees, twenty-one reported that their friends at the university were “all or mostly Chinese students”. When asked about the “main barriers to developing a deep relationship with host nation/Canadian students”, most commented that the cultural barrier was too significant for them to make any meaningful, lasting friendships with local students. Specifically, they reported that they “couldn’t find common topics for conversations”, or “didn’t understand each other’s pop cultural references”, or “had different styles of intercommunication”. Two students also commented that Western students sometimes put on airs when communicating with Chinese international students.

One self-assured fourth-year male student had a different take on why he did not make any local friends:

“It’s because of their lack of Chinese language abilities. A country does not have permanent friends, only permanent interests. If I can bring interests to them, naturally we can make friends. Barrier is I didn’t bring any benefits to them.”

It was interesting to hear his highly utilitarian view of friendship. Equally interesting was the fact that in understanding his personal situation, this student used a regular refrain about national interests often heard in the official Chinese media.

Multiple Frameworks

What are the root causes of self-segregation among Chinese international students? From searching the relevant literature and reading interview transcripts, there are a few frameworks we may use to better understand this tendency. A key outcome of this study is to urge caution in essentializing the phenomenon. Understanding that there are multiple, complex forces at work gives us a better chance to search for solutions.

Host Nation “Hostipitality”

“Hostipitality” is a combined word from “hospitality” and “hostility”, which describes the contradiction that hosts encounter when welcoming the “Other” (Dervin & Layne, 2013). The term was first proposed by Jacques Derrida. Derrida argued that there will be no hospitality without hostility, as hospitality is conditioned on a defined set of “rights, duties, and obligations” (Derrida, 2000). The tension arises with questions like “who should adapt to whom? Can the guest prevail over the host’s requirements?” (Dervin & Layne, 2013).

Dervin and Layne argue that hostipitality is a salient feature of intercultural education on Western campuses. We continue to present the cultural values and attitudes of a national community as prerequisites for newcomers to adopt in order to be welcomed. We attribute intercultural problems to the less competent “Other” and accept that the mission of intercultural education is to teach the Other about how ‘We’ function (Dervin & Layne, 2013).

Moreover, in the context of China, the Western media has, for the most part, been consistent in portraying China as an ideologically, politically, and economically antagonistic rival state. According to a study conducted in 2011 by GlobeScan/PIPA, among those in the G7 countries who were polled, the number of people who said that “China becoming more powerful economically is a bad thing” had risen substantially. In particular, negative views of China’s growing power increased significantly in Canada, from 27% in 2005 to 55% in 2011 (World Public Opinion, 2011). A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017 showed that 65% of Americans either viewed China as either “an adversary” or “a serious problem” (Manevich, 2017).

Not surprisingly, hostility is a prominent feature in communications between overseas Chinese and Western students on Canadian campus. Many of my interviewees commented passionately on this aspect. They reported that many Westerners they had encountered in Canada – although not necessarily Canadians – still thought of China as a poor and backwater place, and that all Chinese people just wanted to run away from their own country. Interviewees expressed their strong annoyance towards such an outdated understanding of their country. Trump’s election was another hot topic. Many noted that Trump’s xenophobic views were especially alarming to international students coming from a political rival state, and were worried that Canada could be influenced by the political climate south of the border.

Moreover, the acculturating experiences in North America were the first encounters of race-based discrimination for many Chinese students, which can be shocking and debilitating. One interviewee said, “Before coming to North America, I was just a person. Now I am a ‘person of color’. I don’t like being labelled like that as if we were not normal.” Six interviewees reported overt discrimination they personally had encountered, including Western students discussing their physical features in a negative way, and asking them to “shut up” when they spoke Chinese in the public. Some were called ethnic epithets near campus.

One interview question asked whether the students felt the need to minimize various aspects of their Chinese culture such as language, clothing, and ways of interaction in order to fit into the culture at the university. Twenty-two interviewees (88%) “strongly agreed” or “agreed”.

The conditions for hospitality, or the hostility side of the “hostipitality”, appeared to be felt acutely among current Chinese overseas students. It is possible that they had long been socially conditioned to feel this way. Even before they left China, the China vs. West dichotomy was instilled in them as part of their historical and political education as well as through Chinese political propaganda, leading many students to conclude that they had to choose sides instead of allowing themselves a fluid identity with which to move between cultural and national groups. Once they were abroad, the sometimes-unpleasant communications with the Westerners, day to day challenges as newcomers and visible minorities, and unfavorable portrait of China in the Western media further convinced them that they had to choose China’s side. These factors led them to believe that they would never be truly accepted by the West. This belief can contribute to self-segregation while abroad.

Collective Identity

The second useful theoretical framework to understand self-segregation is the social identity theory. The theory states that there exists a significant correlation between one's personal identity and self-esteem and one's membership within social categories such as ethnicity, race, or nationality (Tajfel, 1969, 1978). Members of minority groups are more likely than majority groups to be cognitively aware of group identity (Umaña-Taylor, 2004). For instance, Chinese international students may identify Chinese nationality as their most salient in-group (Hail, 2015). This could be because they are frequently seen by others as representatives of China. This may also be due to perceived negative attitudes towards them, as perception that one's group is under attack may cause members to develop stronger emotional attachment to the group (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Major, Kaiser, O'Brien & McCoy, 2007). Moreover, group identification is found to be positively correlated with self-esteem among stigmatized groups, as groups provide "emotional, informational, and instrumental support, social validation for one's perceptions... and a sense of belonging" (Major & O'Brien, 2005).

Within social identity theory, the concept of collective identity is especially helpful in understanding Chinese overseas students. Tajfel, Turner, and Taylor postulate that there are two dimensions and four components of the "self-concept": (1) personal (unique to the individual) vs. collective (characteristics that individual shares with other members of his or her group); and (2) identity ("who am I?") vs. esteem ("am I worthy?") (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Taylor, 1997). Figure 1 shows the hierarchy of those components. Without a clearly defined collective identity, a person cannot develop personal identity and self-esteem, as she/he has "no template upon which to articulate a personal identity, and then a personal self-esteem" (Taylor, 1997).

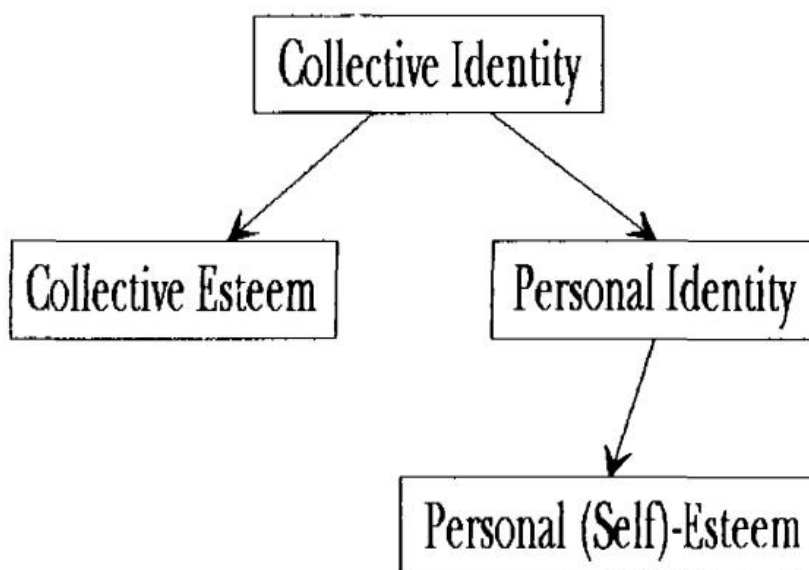


Figure 1: Schematic representation of relative ordering of the four components of self-concept.

Source: Taylor, D. (1997). The Quest for Collective Identity. *Canadian Psychology*, 38(3), 174-190.

Applying the collective identity theory to the context of Chinese international students, I argue that many younger-generation Chinese suffer from a kind of collective identity crisis due to the rapid changes in Chinese society in the last few decades. Their heritage culture has become a confusing array of values as Chinese society shifts from egalitarianism to deep social inequality. Numerous ideologies jostle for dominance: communism, traditional Confucius values, the Chinese communist party's (CCP) appropriation of traditional values, Socialism with Chinese characteristics, Westernization, Globalization, etc. Young Chinese are certainly different from their parents, whose worldview had been shaped by the scarcity of resources and vivid memories of an autarkic political environment of the Cultural Revolution. Once overseas, surrounded by Western ideas and thoughts as well as equipped with newfound political and social freedom, these young Chinese quickly become distinct from their peers who remained in China. Given the generational (temporal) and geographical (spatial) disconnections from their otherwise in-group members, a natural question for Chinese international students is how to reconcile a myriad of different values. Self-segregation can be understood as an attempt to re-establish an in-group in order to build a new collective identity, so that personal identity can be defined and self-esteem enhanced. To some extent the theory of collective identity not only helps explain the self-segregation phenomenon, but also encourages it.

Colonial Mentality and Chinese Nationalism

To further complicate Chinese students' social identity, there are two competing forces at work: colonial mentality and Chinese nationalism.

Colonial mentality refers to "the way colonial pasts continue to influence the psychological experiences of individuals in the present" (Okazaki, David & Abelmann, 2008). Although never fully colonized, China was semi-colonized by various nations since the first Opium War starting in 1839, until the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Chinese in the colonized regions were branded second-class citizens and often refused services and entry to public space such as parks and restaurants. Much of the military, political and cultural struggle in late 19th-century and early 20th-century China centered on regaining confidence as a people and a nation, but to no avail. After chasing away the colonizing foreign forces and a bloody civil war, CCP obtained total political control of the country in 1949. However, Maoist China between 1950s and mid-1970s were plagued by poverty and economic stagnation. When Deng Xiaoping reopened the country and enacted economic reforms in the late 1970s, ordinary Chinese people – as if waking up from a puritanical dream full of fervent and chaotic revolutionary scenes - came face to face with a Western world of dazzling commerce and unimaginable affluence. The West, especially America, served as a de facto benchmark against which progress of the economic and technological reform in China was measured throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Before departing from China, the Post-'80 (八零后) and Post-'90 (九零后) generations of Chinese students were bombarded with

rosy messages about the West - not from the official Chinese media, but from American movies and advertisements, relatives or friends who had moved to the West, and in the recent decade, social media. North America is still seen as the land of opportunities and wealth, although to a lesser degree now due to China's astoundingly rapid economic development. More importantly, North America and Europe are seen as destinations where clean air, water, safe food sources, and therefore better life quality, awaits. The huge private ESL industry as well as industries that prepare students for North American school applications, particularly trumpet these ideas. The fashion, cosmetics, and advertising industry in China has also promoted the ideal of beauty and status based on Western traditions.

As a result, to many Chinese, anything white, North American or European, is superior to anything Chinese. During my annual visits in Shanghai, China, I witnessed manifestations of colonial mentality seeping into Chinese daily lives. Skin-whitening cosmetic products are popular and heavily advertised on TV and in public spaces. Blond and blue-eyed Caucasian models with alabaster skin are all the rage in Chinese commercials. Flashy billboards can be seen in and outside residential communities promoting services that make short-term travel arrangements for Chinese pregnant women to go overseas to deliver babies so that they could have "Western" children. Bilingual daycare facilities pop up in every neighbourhood and despite the hefty fees, often have sizable waiting lists, especially those who employ white native-English-speakers. Preparatory agencies for American and European school applications also have a prominent presence. Traditionally such agencies work with families interested in sending children abroad for university or graduate schools. In recent years, however, target cohorts have increasingly become younger: high school students and even those in primary school. During summer months, "cultural experience" trips to North America are popular, promising parents that their children will be able to experience the "most American lives". Even the small bakery servicing my parents' neighbourhood in Shanghai put out a blackboard every day, detailing sources of ingredients to show that nothing Chinese made it into their baked goods.

It is well understood that colonial mentality can lead to ethnic self-hatred, especially when one pursues futile goals of emulating the dominant group at the expense of her/his heritage culture (David & Okazaki, 2006). Among my interviewees, I observed that those who were most eager to assimilate into the mainstream culture exhibited stronger signs of colonial mentality. They also reported higher levels of stress than those who were more at ease with their Chinese identity.

One female undergraduate student commented, "It's very hard to balance being a Chinese and preserving Chinese identity vs. integrating into the white society. I'm still struggling every day to figure out how to do that." Another former PhD student decided to stop using Chinese language after moving to Canada. She developed a hatred for her Chinese accent and felt ashamed of it every time she spoke. The stress eventually led to a mental breakdown. She only recovered after she joined a Chinese fellowship church and formed meaningful and lasting friendships. For some Chinese overseas students, self-segregation may be used as a shield against detrimental psychological effects resulting from colonial mentality.

A competing, or perhaps countering force against colonial mentality is the Chinese nationalism that has become increasingly salient in recent years. Callahan pointed out that one crucial aspect of Chinese nationalism is that it is not just about celebrating the glories of Chinese civilisation, but also the very deliberate celebration of national humiliation (Callahan, 2004). The semi-colonial period that started with the First Opium War in 1839 and ended with the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949 has been called "a Century of National Humiliation" by China's ruling communist party. This "century" witnessed British navy blasting open the gate of China's ancient civilization, various Western powers forcing numerous concessions and occupations on China, and a series of anti-imperialism wars as well as a brutal civil war. According to Chinese Communist Party's founding mythology, the national humiliation only ended with CCP's victorious takeover in 1949. In China, numerous songs, books, museums are devoted to commemorating this "century". The success of such political propaganda has led many Chinese to believe that China is highly unique in its national humiliation. The government frequently relies on this historical narrative for political and economic projects and social cohesion (Callahan, 2004).

This helps us understand why much of the reported communication conflict between overseas Chinese and Western locals is related to discussions on Tibet, Xinjiang, South China Sea, Taiwan, etc. Chinese have been taught to view these conflicts as new humiliations inflicted upon China, following a long history of national humiliation suffered at the hands of Western powers (Callahan, 2004). It is no wonder these topics evoke a particularly intense emotion among overseas Chinese and remain as sore spots for communication between Westerners and Chinese.

National humiliation is also used to draw boundaries between Self and Other, and between what is Chinese and what is foreign (Callahan, 2004). Therefore, on one hand, the national humiliation campaign results in a kind of xenophobic attitude among many Chinese; on the other hand, it also leads to a self-critical examination of "Chineseness" (Callahan, 2004), in order to answer the question: "how can we have allowed foreigners to inflict such damage upon us?"

This self-criticalness has intellectual roots reaching back to the May Fourth Movement of the 1910s and 1920s, and can manifest in a similar way to colonial mentality. The current young generation of Chinese frequently attribute various sorts of backwardness to China, such as corruption, low quality, jealousy, etc. The perception of foreign superiority, often entangled with colonial mentality, could also be understood as a reproach to Chinese backwardness.

To some observers of Chinese culture, the combination of Chinese self-criticalness and fervent nationalism may appear puzzling. One useful framework to understand this seeming contradiction is the concept of filial nationalism, which can serve as a powerful reconciling force. Marxist ideology has been losing its grip on China since the early 1980s, partially due to the mental exhaustion and apathy among regular Chinese after decades of Communist political movements, and partially as a result of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policies. To maintain social cohesion and the Party's legitimacy, a unifying ideology was urgently needed. Confucianism, especially the importance of filial piety, which had been condemned in the most vehement fashion during the Maoist era, was brought back by the State. Through propaganda campaigns using various media,

the Chinese people were once again called upon to focus their energy on taking care of their elders. More importantly, the nation of China and the CCP was portrayed as a loving mother who deserved the lifelong devotion of her children: the Chinese people (Fong, 2004). Having gone through more than a decade of political education through the Chinese mandatory education system, Chinese overseas students are well-versed in filial nationalism. No matter how critical young Chinese can be of their own country, “they could no more cease to be ‘people of China’ than they could cease to be their parents’ children” (Fong, 2004). Filial nationalism is a highly powerful sentiment that ties Chinese students together, even when they are overseas pursuing a Western education.

Other Contextual Considerations

Canada, especially its urban centres, has become an extremely popular destination for Chinese parents to send their children. My interviewees talked about the severe imbalance of supply and demand for quality higher education within China, the good reputation and perceived prestige of major Canadian universities in mainland China, the clean air and democratic society, and the liberal, pro-immigration government which is in stark contrast to Trump’s administration in the U.S. One of the simple reasons behind Chinese students’ self-segregation is that the number of Chinese students has grown so large on some Canadian campuses that, for many, there is little need to reach out to other student communities for friendship and support.

Another contributing factor may be the off-campus tutoring services that specifically target Chinese students. These services have been growing rapidly. Most of my interviewees had taken classes with private tutoring services who give lectures in Mandarin. Chinese students formed their communities through this parallel, shadowy channel of schooling system. Therefore, such Mandarin tutoring schools may have further exacerbated the self-segregation phenomenon.

Sometimes Chinese students also self-segregate based on class, wealth and political connections. Students from Chinese families of higher socioeconomic classes or rich political connections understand that they form an important interest group with special status inherited from their parents and grandparents. They understand that this special “tribe” would be most crucial to their future social mobility and status, and that is where they should invest their social energy (Fan, 2016; Shyong, 2016). However, these students constitute a small minority among the Chinese student population.

Lastly, we should keep an important caveat in mind. John Berry proposed that for newcomers to a society there are four acculturation strategies based on different levels of identification with the dominant vs. heritage culture: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization (Berry, 2003). We can observe Chinese students with varying degrees of all four strategies on Canadian campuses. In this paper, we focus on the separation/self-segregation strategy, as it has been widely observed among Chinese students, and is one of the most concerning for educators. However, it is by no means the only strategy Chinese international students are using for acculturation.

Paths Towards Desegregation?

As discussed above, there are multiple forces that lead to Chinese students' tendency for self-segregation. So where do we go from here? Is there any path towards desegregation?

Since the diagnosis is highly complex, we should not expect an easy solution. First and foremost, we need to acknowledge that visible minority international students are often confronted with powerful effects of inequities and injustices, which are underestimated by universal models of acculturation (Okazaki, David & Abelmann, 2008). The tendency for self-segregation cannot be eliminated by force through the dominant culture. Forced assimilation can only lead to further internal colonialism and identity crisis (Okazaki, David & Abelmann, 2008). At a high level, disadvantaged groups need to be empowered first, and then encouraged to become bicultural. At the same time, the mainstream should be asked to accommodate different cultures. The bottom line is that international student groups should not bear the full responsibility of assimilating into a dominant mainstream culture.

Strategically and tactically, I focus on the following two areas:

1. How do we teach English to Chinese international students, and for that matter, other ESL students?
2. Strategies beyond language teaching.

Teaching ESL

There are a few reasons why I focus on language teaching in discussing paths towards desegregation. One reason is that culture is an invisible construct while language is one of the few tangible manifestations of culture (Taylor, 1997). Another is that my interview results showed that language discrepancy was a main source of discrimination as well as a source of anxiety for Chinese international students.

Moreover, teaching and learning English is not a valueless activity. Choices of English phrases and speech acts in English teaching conducted by unreflective teachers often result in suggestions that ESL students accept and internalize particular cultural norms, values and beliefs of the English-speaking country. Canagarajah wrote that in a post-colonial world, the "decolonization project entails resisting English in favour of building an autonomous nation state", on the other hand, "globalization has made the borders of the nation state porous and reinserted the importance of English language... although non-Western communities were busy working on the decolonization project, the carpet has been pulled from under their feet by globalization movement" (Canagarajah, 2008).

In the case of China, it now has the largest private ESL industry in the world. From preschoolers to adults, middle-class Chinese appear to have an obsession for learning English. As of 2016 the value of the ESL market in China is about \$4.5 billion USD and is expected to grow at an annual rate of 12-15% for the next few years (Gamlam, 2016). Taking a random stroll in Shanghai, you can hardly walk for five minutes without seeing an advertisement for an ESL program. ESL advertisements often feature the highest-earning celebrities in China, showing the financial prowess of the industry. Most ESL

programs boast their methods for training students to become just like native speakers with the “correct” accent and cultural understanding. To many Chinese parents and their children, English is preferred to their own language, as it is perceived as superior and more prestigious. Such perceptions can contribute to and exacerbate an existing colonial mentality. When the promise of superiority and prestige fails to be delivered, as overseas Chinese students quickly realize upon arriving in North America, the much-lauded goal of speaking like a native speaker becomes a source of anxiety and shame among Chinese students. They feel they are inferior to native speakers, and this feeling of inferiority can transcend mere language abilities and infest their core identities. They feel the need to hide their bilingual, hybrid self. They set unrealistic goals and continue to pressure themselves to imitate the “master’s voice”, which can ultimately hinder their progress in learning English (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu & Riazi, 2002).

So how can our institutions teach ESL better? From searching the literature on critical pedagogy and linguistics, one of the most crucial and urgent changes required to accomplish this is to shift “attention from the differential status of speakers” (native vs. non-native speaker) “to the mutual practice of communication itself”, to “acknowledge the various, nonhierarchicalized ways of being an English speaker” (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu & Riazi, 2002). These principles should be firmly adopted by ESL teachers and explicitly communicated to ESL students from the beginning and throughout the program. McKay also suggested shifting teaching materials from “target culture materials only” to materials that present a great variety of cultures in both English and non-English speaking countries, a text that shows non-native speakers interact with each other in cross-cultural encounters (McKay, 2004). Such learning materials can provide opportunities for ESL students to tell stories from their own culture in English, learn other non-English cultures from their peers, and prompt ESL teachers to become active listeners or even “students”.

Most importantly, we should encourage ESL students to intentionally think about the various ways they may appropriate English for their own purposes (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu & Riazi, 2002). At the beginning of an ESL course, teachers may either set aside class time or include it as an early assignment for students to reflect and articulate their personal motivations to improve their English skills. Teachers should make an effort to remind students of purposes and motivations that are beyond the immediate utility of English language and encourage students to focus on “taking ownership” of the language. They may also choose to provide a sample list of “purposes and motivations” to facilitate the discussions and reflections. The list may include entering into different sociocultural groups, opening up a new intellectual world, or experimenting with a new identity. For Chinese international students, adopting English and a new (and perceivably temporary) identity may make them feel more liberated to comment on political, social and cultural issues they would otherwise find too sensitive to discuss. It is also possible that by mastering the English language, visible minority groups such as Chinese students may turn the “master” language on its head and develop counter discourses to transcend silence and marginalization. Critical ESL pedagogy requires actively cultivating in learners a sense of ownership of the language. ESL students should be treated as legitimate English speakers and writers who can appropriate the language for their own purposes in their own contexts (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu & Riazi, 2002).

On the other hand, locals (hosts) need to share the cross-cultural communication “burden” with the newcomers, as language and culture teaching and learning should be seen as a negotiable, co-created, co-constructed process between the two parties. At my university, we are in the process of framing the intercultural education in a more positive way. From the host’s perspective, instead of thinking of intercultural difference as a burden, we begin to see it as a unique opportunity for local students to expand their language and cultural horizon. One proposed initiative is to include a measure of global engagement in most or all programs of study. Local students would be required to demonstrate their global engagement through various options. They may take courses in a language other than English, participate in study abroad programs with a language immersion component, or take on internships in a language other than English. Implementing such a measure would require local students to actively learn a foreign language and its embedded culture. In that process, we are likely to see grassroots language and cultural exchange groups, as well as greater, more genuine interactions between locals and international students.

Beyond Language Teaching

Finally, I explore strategies and tactics beyond language teaching, based on literature review and my interview findings. Lucas and Katz’s study of nine K-12 programs showed great promises for code-mixing and code-switching practices where English is the primary language of instruction for language minority students. These practices include: translating content back and forth between first language (L1) and second language (L2), helping students develop communities to scaffold language and content learning, pairing English-proficient students with those less proficient for collaborative tasks in their first language, writing journals that focus more on content than on language, etc. Accommodating first languages (L1) in classrooms, especially for students not yet proficient in the language (e.g. first-year international students in Canada), proved to *help* students develop English abilities (see Cummins’ linguistic interdependence principle, 1991, 1992). This also has psychological benefits, as placing value on first languages supports students’ growth of self-esteem and strengthens their identity (Lucas & Katz, 1994).

At my university, we are exploring ways to offer multilingual tutorials and office hours, taking advantage of our great multilingual teaching assistant resources. We see this as a way to combat rampant off-campus tutoring services that target international – especially Chinese - students, which may have exacerbated the self-segregation phenomenon among Chinese students.

For students with relatively high language skills (e.g., upper-year international students), a helpful pedagogical strategy to counter self-segregation is to include group projects that deliberately mix local and international students. Those group projects can help build common in-group identities and solidarity between international and local students. The best projects for group collaboration are those with open questions and complex solutions that force team members to take part in intense collaborations (Campi, 2015).

As part of the scaffolding, studies have shown that it may be best to start with online collaboration between international and local students (Campi, 2015). For instance, online discussion forums and Q&As with participation marks are effective and relatively

easy to implement. International students often feel more comfortable working and collaborating online instead of face-to-face. As international students gain more confidence in inter-group communications, educators may proceed to collaborative assignments requiring face-to-face interactions.

Many of my interviewees reported that the only times they had built meaningful relationships with local students were during course projects. The key, then, is to improve the continuity of those connections and fledgling in-group identities through more frequent team-based learning throughout their programs.

Similarly, social activities on and off campus that deliberately mix local and international students may also help break barriers. Buddy systems in school residence, cultural exchange student groups, fundraising, arts, or sporting events co-run by local and international students are some examples of such extracurricular activities.

While approaching activities – academic, social, or both - that bring local and international students together, both parties need to bear in mind that in inter-group communications, intentions matter a great deal. For instance, since the historiography of National Humiliation is often a source of national insecurities for Chinese international students, a symbolic recognition of this history can be a profound game changer. It is beneficial for local hosts to understand the historical reasons why certain topics are especially sensitive for overseas Chinese. By showing their knowledge and understanding of this history, and therefore their respect, inter-group communications are likely to be carried out in good faith, even in more turbulent terrains.

Conclusion

In summary, similar pattern of self-segregation has been observed among Chinese international students studying in Canada as in the United States. There are multiple, complex forces that have contributed to this tendency. Locals in the host nation may exhibit “hostipitality” in their communication with Chinese students, which may cause the latter group to believe that they would never be truly accepted by the West. The rapid changes in Chinese society in the last few decades may have contributed to a kind of collective identity crisis in the younger-generation Chinese, which pressures them to seek out ways to reconcile a plethora of different values and to establish an in-group in order to rebuild a new collective identity that their personal identity and self-esteem depend upon. The push-and-pull of colonial mentality and Chinese nationalism adds even more complex dynamics to Chinese students’ social identity. Chinese nationalism, with its unique characteristic of filial nationalism, sometimes serves as a remedial force, or even an overcorrection, to the detrimental effects of colonial mentality. This brand of nationalism may also be exacerbated by host nation hostipitality and further drives Chinese international students to self-segregation.

Understanding the myriad of factors contributing to Chinese students’ self-segregation is a crucial first step towards finding mitigating measures to such tendency. From there, educators may want to consider a few strategic and practical changes to encourage desegregation. In ESL teaching, we should shift attention from status of native vs. non-native speakers to the mutual practice of communication itself. We may want to adopt teaching materials that showcase non-English speaking countries and cultures. We should encourage students to actively appropriate English for their own

purposes. In classrooms other than ESL courses, we may consider code-mixing and code-switching practices that focus more on content learning than language learning. Multilingual tutorials, group projects that deliberately mix local and international students, as well as social and extracurricular activities co-run by local and international students can all help break barriers. Ultimately, an open mind and open heart, good intentions, a lack of preconceptions and a willingness to learn, and mutual respect can go a long way in fostering less segregated student communities.

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