

## Conference Paper

# Identity of the Chinese Students in the Russian Universities

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## Abstract

Due to the globalization process, most modern universities international. Russian higher education is also becoming multilingual and multicultural. A multicultural couples with a new academic experience has a significant impact on a new identity formation. Social identity is an individual's sense of self as a member of a social group through sharing its values and involvement in activities to maintain its existence. Based on the 2017-2018 survey conducted among students from the People's Republic of China and among university professors and specialists with international student advisory responsibilities, the article argues that an identity serves as a guideline in a self-determination process, helping the individual to cope with an uncertainty in terms of student mobility. A new identity formation plays a significant role in the process of acculturation of foreign students while studying abroad. Chinese students act as representatives of the values, behavioral norms and standards both of the Chinese community and Russian student community as well as the urban community. While studying in Russia, they adjust to formal and informal behavioral practices and develop them reproducing local academic and campus traditions.

**Keywords:** identity, Chinese students, university, ethnic group

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## 1. Introduction

Globalization affects almost all spheres of the life of social communities having a significant impact on the institutional transformation and modernization. Russia is an important actor in the international arena and is actively involved in these processes [1]. The Russian higher education is being included in the global educational services market. The Russian universities are becoming multilingual cultural centers, promoting learning environment for the international students [2].

The modern academic environment is open to the international students with an annual rise in their number. It is believed that studying abroad is a worthwhile investment that not only enhances the communication skills in foreign languages, but it is also a

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valuable practical experience [3, 4]. In this regard, the issues of adaptation to a new learning environment as well as the issues related to the new identity formation of international students while studying in Russia are of particular relevance.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

E. Erikson developed the classical understanding of identity in Social and Human Sciences [5]. He defined identity as a self-awareness of corporeality, as well as a self-awareness being surrounded by other people. The individual is considered a combination of different identities expressed in the typical social actions that form social relations. According to E. Goffman, the very first impression of a stranger based on the appearance make it possible to classify him or her as belonging to specific groups. In other words, it provides information about someone's social identity [6].

P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann [7] on the basis of the role theory use the concept of socialization as the foundation for further development of the identity theory. Socialization is associated with a large emotional load which is directly related to the development of one's identity. The foreign students coming to another country need time to adjust to a new reality, culture and behavioral patterns. They also search for new identities and their further reproduction. At the same time, they have a vital need to be emotionally recognized, to meet the expectations of *significant others* who accompany the international students in their daily activities.

Identity formation is a lifelong process. During this process the identities are under constant revision [8]. The individual can change his or her identity by choosing the most relevant and convenient one at the particular life situation, understanding the large variety of personal identification options [9].

The modern societies are characterized by rapidly switching between identities. The variety of identities expands the social network of the individual and acts as a helping tool in the process of adaptation. It can be argued that the more identities the individual has, the more diverse one's life becomes. The single identity implies a significant limitation to the individual's life which may be characterized as a routine with repeating behavioral patterns and standardized values.

The social systems in the globalization era produce new social institutions and patterns which are the basis for constructing new identities. Identity formation appears as an incomplete non-linear process accompanied by crises, breakthroughs, breaks, etc. According to S. Hall, identity is a relative never-ending process [10]. According to A.

Giddens, the world in the process of globalization has not become more *manageable*, but on the contrary has got out of control and *slipping through the fingers* [11].

Identity is a kind of social control. It performs a protective function, giving the individual confidence and contributing through reflection to the formation of a sense of security against daily life risks [12]. Globalization starts self-identification processes when reflection makes it possible to choose among different identities.

### 3. Data and Methods

The study was conducted using qualitative sociological research methods. The main goal of the research was to analyze the everyday activities of the Chinese students studying currently at the Ural Federal University (UrFU). Such approach allows us to specify the social identity diversity of the international students. The primary data were collected in 2017-2018 using the semi-structured face-to-face interviews with bachelor and master's students enrolled in the Human and Social Sciences programs. We interviewed 22 students in total. There were 14 girls and 8 boys among the respondents with an average age of 24. The average length of an interview was 45 minutes. The authors developed a semi-structured interview guide with a predominance of open-ended questions to give the respondents the opportunity to express their own opinion. The following topics were discussed during the interview: the adaptation strategies for studying at the Russian university; the specific characteristics of housekeeping habits and leisure activities; the broadening of social networks that promote the new identity formation and preserve the old ones. The next step in our study was the transcription of the collected interviews to group the answers to the same questions. Such an approach revealed the common and specific features of the respondents' answers which facilitated further interpretation of the data collected.

In addition, we have developed an interview guide consisting of 10 questions for the university professors and specialists who have the international student advisor's responsibilities. We conducted 5 interviews with the average length of 40 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and the answers were grouped according to the following thematic blocks: the main challenges faced by the students; the main ways to overcome the challenges; the social networks of the students during their stay at the university.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The Chinese student migration to Russia is accompanied by cultural shock [13, 14]. To overcome it and to adapt successfully to a new environment the Chinese students join the already existing ethnic community [15]. *“When I came to Russia my first step was to meet students who have already come to Russia from Beijing”* (male, 23 years old). The belonging of foreign students to a specific ethnic group allows preserving and reproducing their own identity, but it also complicates the new identity formation process. The same language and culture increase positive emotions and a sense of security even outside the homeland. Ward and Searle argue that strong ethnic ties contribute to further strengthening of ethnic identity [16].

Ethnic identity is actively used by the students in the process of adaptation to the system of higher education in Russia and to everyday life environment. The students have knowledge of social norms and values of the host community through interaction with the representatives of their ethnic group: *“... they help me a lot. We go shopping for groceries with my friend from China with whom we have met here...”* (female, 19 years old); *“... I meet my brother every day. He has showed me the university, some lecture halls. He has also introduced me some professors...”* (female, 20 years old).

According to the professors of the Ural Federal University who have the international student advisor's responsibilities, the Chinese students are characterized by the high cohesion of the ethnic community: *“... the Chinese university community is enormous. I think, Chinese students mostly appeal to those within the community who know Russian better... it is hardly to see Chinese students one at a time...”* (female, 18 years of the university work experience). International students within a new sociocultural environment build their network primarily with the students of their ethnic group [17].

The students from the PRC represent the most numerous group of the international students studying at the Ural Federal University: *“... the Chinese students are the most representative group...”* (female, 18 years of the university work experience). For more than half a century the Russian universities have been actively enrolling representatives of this ethnic group. As a result, there are strong and stable social contacts within the given university based on the Chinese language, traditions and culture preservation. The newcomers are joining the already existing ethnic networks: *“... parents told me to go to the UrFU to study. There are many students like me here. If there are some difficulties, they will help me. I will not be left all alone...”* (male, 23 years old).

According to the respondents, it is important for them to be able to speak their native language: *“... I learn Russian, but it is also very important for me to speak my native*

*language...*” (female, 24 years). Housekeeping habits also play big role in preserving ethnic identity: “... I received some spices for cooking... the food here is not very spicy... we cook with my friends...” (female, 26 years old).

The language preservation and reproduction are considered the key feature of ethnic identity outside the home country. Mother tongue is used to communicate among the local ethnic student group and to interact with relatives, friends and acquaintances through the use of new information and communication technology (e-mail, messaging apps, etc.). According to the Chinese students, virtual communication is an important factor in preserving ethnic identity because “... travelling home is very expensive” (female, 24 years old).

New learning environment sets a new vector of identity formation. Higher education is considered as a way to expand the existing self-identity set. “... I am a student. I attend lectures and seminars, do assignments...” (male, 22 years old). The Chinese students reproduce the local traditional learning practices which are characterized by a certain rhythm and structure. In addition, the Chinese students get knowledge of informal rules and practices. According to one master’s students, there is a wide range of superstitions she uses to pass the exams. “... I do not wash my head before the exam” (female, 25 years old).

According to the respondents, they acquire such type of knowledge through communication with the Russian students. Nowadays, the interaction with the host community is becoming closer, because of the rule established for the university dormitories. In accordance with the rule, the international students have to share rooms with the Russian students to reduce the adaptation barriers. The same practice exists at the UrFU. The Chinese students note that it contributes to better understanding of the life in Russia, its culture, traditions and customs. “... we celebrated New Year. I cooked my national cuisine and my neighbor cooked hers. We invited some girls from the next room... There was a lot of food...Then the girls took pills to overcome stomach ache, they also offered me to take some pills...” (female, 22 years old). This practice helps to overcome ethnic isolationism and contributes to further formation of the students and city residents’ identities.

The Chinese students get knowledge not only about informal norms typical for the Russian students living in cities, but also about their housekeeping superstitions: “... if a black cat crosses the road, you cannot cross the road after it... you shouldn’t go back if you realize you have forgotten something at home...” (female, 26 years old). These practices suggest that the Chinese students develop the identity of a Russian city resident. The way the Chinese students spend their free time also supports the

idea. Despite the fact that most of the respondents prefer passive leisure surfing the Web, there are some respondents who go to the cinema and do shopping, walk around the city or do sports in the fitness center. Gaining experience in organizing free time in accordance with the norms of the host community is required for successful adaptation of the international students [18]. The urban identity formation plays a significant role in the process of acculturation of the representatives of another culture.

## 5. Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from the present study. Firstly, one's identity is the basis of self-determination and self-assertion of the individual. It enhances the chances of the student to adapt successfully to a new environment while studying abroad.

Secondly, the Chinese students act as carriers of the values, behavioral norms and standards of the ethnic group they belong to and reproduce them in everyday life outside the home country. It is common for the Chinese students to join the local ethnic community, which allows them to preserve their language and culture, traditions and customs. In addition, representatives of the local Chinese ethnic community help newcomers to adjust to the new learning environment.

Thirdly, a new identity of the student body is formed during the integration into the learning process. The Chinese students, being representatives of the local student body, adjust to the formal and informal behavioral practices and develop them reproducing the academic and campus traditions.

Fourthly, the approaches of the Chinese students towards housekeeping and leisure activities characterize them as representatives of the urban community with the tendency to spend their free time in the public and semi-public spaces.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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