Thai university students studying in China: Identity, imagined communities, and communities of practice

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Abstract: Previous research on studying abroad has documented the value of exploring students’ interactions with the members of their host community with a focus on the theoretical concepts of identity, imagined communities, and communities of practice. Following this line of research, this qualitative study breaks new ground through investigating how nine Thai students studying in China navigated the complex process of identity negotiation in their imagined communities and communities of practice. This investigation revisits intercultural sensitivity, proximity and boundaries in exploring how the students’ communities of practice afforded different opportunities to demonstrate their identities. The findings reveal that the students envisioned belonging to an imagined community of foreign students in China by demonstrating the identities of cross-cultural mediators and dedicated language learners. However, the misalignment between the students’ imaginations and the realities in their host communities caused predicaments with their identity negotiation. The Thai students’ multi-layered experiences and the social contexts of Chinese language learning influenced their identities, which in turn mediated their senses of belonging to imagined communities of Chinese speakers, and their self-perceived Chinese language competencies. Relevant pedagogical implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: identity, identity negotiation, imagined community, communities of practice

1 Introduction

Communities of practice are spaces in which learners gain membership and identity through a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger 1998).
Communities of practice are formed by learners who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor, e.g. a group of Thai students studying Chinese in China. Related to this, identities are (re)negotiated in immediate or concrete lives (Kanno and Norton 2003, Teng 2018), and a great deal of research exists on language learning and learner identity while studying abroad (e.g. Jackson 2017, Kinginger 2004, Müller and Schmenk 2017). As China’s economic power has continued to rise with its cultural popularity in recent years, the number of foreigners who learn Chinese in China has also increased (Lewin 2010). Foreign students studying in China are assumed to have limited legitimate access to their desired identities; thus, their identity establishment shows a perplexing nature in this context. For example, American students studying in China display a perplexing nature of identity development as they encounter the social interactive and pragmatic dimensions of the target language and the cultural differences in a new community (Du 2015). In addition, Korean students in China, while being subject to the polarized positions of assimilation and separation, display a complex process of negotiating imagined identities (Gao 2012a). In response to the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 and China’s One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR) Initiative, the number of Thai students learning Chinese has tripled in the past three years (China news 2016). This number is expected to grow due to China’s increasing international importance. However, few studies have explored student participation in a new community, particularly for the students who may not be viewed as legitimate speakers of a language in a specific context (Block 2007a), such as the Thai students in the present study. To address this gap and understand identities of this specific group of Thai students, this study explored the communities (both actual and desired) that the Thai students expected to join after studying in China, and how the students’ identities were shaped by their imagined communities and communities of practice.

### 1.1 Identity, imagined communities and communities of practice

As delineated in Kinginger (2009), study abroad has the potential to enhance language learning proficiency. However, research on learning outcomes has consistently revealed individual differences. Some students registered impressive gains in target language proficiency or documented communicative abilities, whereas others do not. Some may even appear to have forgotten what they learned about the target language after their sojourn abroad (Kinginger 2008). If we assume study abroad is a new community for learners to learn high quality
and contextualized language, how can we explain their occasionally different achievements? This mystery drives researchers to specify the identity development of the sojourners. Identity is the core of language learning process. As stated by Handley et al. (2006), “Learning is not simply about developing one’s knowledge and practice, it also involves a process of understanding who we are and in which communities of practice we belong and are accepted” (p. 644). Identity refers to a social category: a set of people marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and features or attributes. Identity is also a distinguishing characteristic(s) that an individual takes special pride in or views as socially consequential (Fearon 1999). Thus, identity is not fixed but dynamic as it is based on an individual’s direct engagement in their immediate and concrete social, cultural, economic, and political context (Norton 2000). The fluid and dynamic nature of identity brings difficulties to the learning of a new language. Responding to the complexity of identities, researchers are paying more attention to communities of practice as a key to understanding identity defined by a shared domain of interest.

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion, negotiating their self-actualization in immediate situations or learning how to improve while they interact (Wenger 1998). Language learning is a part of students’ lived experience of community participation. This participation is active and purposeful involvement in the community. Through legitimate peripheral participation, a newcomer can become a full member of the community through sustained effort and guidance from old-timers. Learning a language is thus a process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice, constructing an identity, and becoming a different person in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). An imagined community, which is established on the grounds of an individual’s past experience and future aspirations, denotes a desired community that offers the possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options (Yim 2016). As argued by Pavlenko and Norton (2007), students envision their imagined community based on their identity, and their actual and desired membership in the imagined community affects their learning trajectory. Norton (2001) defines an imagined community as one that an individual intends to belong to someday while learning and using the target language. In her study, the non-participation of two English language learners in the classroom was the result of their failure to sufficiently improve their English to belong to their imagined communities. The mismatch between their imaginations and reality brought their negative feelings towards the community and its members. They gradually started putting less effort in the classroom and finally withdrew their participation. This finding is indicative that students may, despite their participation in the same learning context, envision
multiple coexisting imagined communities which shape their efforts and engagement to learn the target language.

Previous studies have either focused on identity formation from immediate and concrete communities of practice (e.g. Young et al. 2015) or on social interactions where each member takes a position and simultaneously reacts to others’ positions (e.g. Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001). However, concrete communities and social interactions are not the only ways to form an identity. The students who move to new communities are likely to form new images of the world around them, which contributes to their personal growth. Thus, an exploration of identity formation from the perspective of imagination is needed. According to Gao (2012b), imagination allows us to transcend our immediate environment and reach wider communities, wherein our imagined identities may greatly affect our prevailing identities and language learning practices. When studying abroad, imagination—a faculty for creative ability to expand oneself through transcending time and space while forming new images, ideas, and sensations of the world—is the primary source underlying the sense of belonging to a community. This suggests that it is important to examine learners’ imagined identities, which are constructed while imagining relationships between themselves, others, and objects in the same time and place, with which they have no straightforward or direct interaction (Norton 2001). Imagination is also the way by which students (or others) position their membership in an imagined world, which affects their cultural identification and language practices (Anderson 1991, Gao 2012b). For example, when students study abroad, it is normal for them to imagine what life in a new country will be like, how they will cope linguistically in an environment where they have limited contact with speakers of their native language and how they will position their personal and social identities.

In terms of investigating students’ social networks and identity construction during study abroad, Allen (2010) suggested that overseas study is a learning context emerging from a dynamic interplay between the intentions of learners and those of their communities of practice. A group of foreign students might develop all sorts of measures of dealing with their communities, including surviving in a new place and maintaining an identity they can tolerate. They may value their collective competence and learn from each other, even if they encounter people who may not do so or recognize their identity. In communities of practice, some learners are central members while others are peripheral. Some of the peripheral members become central members as they become more experienced. For example, Umino and Benson’s (2016) study, focusing on an Indonesian student’s experience while studying in Japan, suggested that the student’s opportunities for interaction in Japanese were limited due to his
peripheral participation in institutionally organized communities of practice. At the end of his four-year stay in Japan, he became a central member of an informal self-organized community of practice that consisted mainly of his Japanese friends who were supportive of his interactions and language development. In Kinginger’s (2004) study, the imagination of a student studying in France did not align with the reality she encountered; she contemplated suicide. However, due to her agency in perceiving learning opportunities, she worked to align her experience with her imagination, and eventually succeeded in joining French social networks. Trentman (2013) also noted that American students studying in Egypt wanted to belong to an imagined community. The participation in the communities of practice allowed many students to perform as both cross-cultural mediators and dedicated language learners. However, both alignments and misalignments between reality and imagination afforded them different opportunities to demonstrate their identities. The degree of alignment between their expectations and the realities they encountered affected their interactions in Arabic. For example, some female students felt trapped within this tightly knit community and thus became less invested in interacting with locals in the target language.

Overall, the past and the present that “encounter and transform each other” in the “presence of fissures, gaps, and contradictions …” (Block 2007b: 864) may bring ambivalence to students’ identity when being exposed to unfamiliar practices. While studying abroad, students need to participate in diverse spaces or communities and assert themselves as legitimate users, learners, and speakers of the target language. If students sense that their presence in a new context is accepted, they perceive that their ‘self’ has been validated (Pellegrino 2005). Similarly, if they perceive that learning the target language will be useful for their social needs, they perceive its native speakers positively and strive to emulate them. For example, in a supportive and friendly learning environment, students will be more willing to accept a new culture and reinforce their imagined identity (Ting-Toomey 2005), and more motivated to learn and use a new language (Clément et al. 2007). In contrast, if learners find their trip abroad too daunting or unfriendly, they will retreat from reality and thus reduce their efforts to learn the language (Bui & Teng 2018, Jackson 2008). It appears that identity, while shaping the study abroad experience, is negotiated and reconstructed when being understood, respected, and affirmatively valued during students’ experiences abroad. Hence, language learning in study abroad is a dialogic and situated affair whose success depends on the way the students are received by their host community, as well as the attributes and intentions of the students, e.g. how they interpret the social, cultural, and linguistic practices of their host communities. While
arguments concerning language development and study abroad can be made, a quantitative orientation (e.g. Freed et al. 2004) or previous qualitative studies (e.g. Du 2015, Jackson 2017) could not sufficiently trace the development of social networks offering access to learning opportunities, e.g. why some students become more engaged in language learning than do others. In addition, students’ different backgrounds and their length of stay in the new community further complex this issue. The present study aims to build a more in-depth understanding of identity development and language learning during study abroad with a focus on Thai students in China against the backdrop of China’s grand strategy of OBOR.

2 This study

The literature review reveals that there is a lack of research exploring Southeast Asian, especially Thai students’ identity formation from imagined communities and communities of practice while studying in China. This study, drawing upon an ethnographic approach commonly adopted in studies of imagined communities and education (e.g. Dagenais 2003), aims to fill this research lacuna. It focuses on interactions between Thai students and the local population, and how the students’ imagined communities and communities of practice influence their learning trajectories and practices, and construction of identity. This study attempts to answer two questions:

1. In which imagined communities do the Thai students desire participation before and after studying in China?
2. To what extent do these imagined communities align with the communities of practice in which the Thai learners participated while studying in China? How does this affect their identity formation?

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Context

A group of Thai students entered a program at a university in Guangxi, China. Guangxi, an autonomous region bordering Vietnam, has strategic land and sea links to the ASEAN region and thus becomes an important foothold for the OBOR initiative. This program was specifically designed for Thai college students who had received some formal education of Chinese in Thailand and were seeking...
better proficiency in Chinese. The one-year program was the product of cooperation between a liberal arts college in Thailand and a university in Guangxi. The main courses included Speaking Chinese, Chinese Grammar, Chinese Culture, and History of China. All of the students were required to complete daily homework, a mid-term exam, and a final exam. The participants also attended some extracurricular activities with local students, including hiking, visiting cultural communication festivals, travelling, and engaging in other opportunities to communicate with local students.

2.1.2 Participants

Of the 30 Thai students who were enrolled in the program, 16 volunteered to take part in this study. Given the purpose of the study, nine learners, aged 22–24 years, who provided information-rich input and were able to reflect, articulate and willing to share their stories and were hospitable to the inquiry of this study, were purposefully selected. The participants were at the end of the third year of their undergraduate degrees and would be spending their final year studying in China. They started learning Chinese after they entered college. None of the participants were heritage speakers of any Chinese dialect. Four of the participants reported having relatively high proficiency in Chinese. Three said they were of intermediate level and two were of low proficiency level. All of the students were permanent residents of Thailand. Only two students had previously been to China for five days or a week. The participants were from different majors, including Chinese literature (n = 3), education (n = 3), and Asian studies (n = 3). The three participants majoring in Chinese literature received pre-departure training, but other participants did not. According to the participants, the training mainly focused on language learning and cultural issues. The nine students signed a consent form on a voluntary basis and were told that they could withdraw from the study at any point if they wished. Pseudonyms are used in this article to assure confidentiality. Table 1 summarizes the personal descriptions and backgrounds of the nine interviewees.

2.1.3 Ethnographic data collection

Data collection was conducted over one year through an ethnographic approach. The data were triangulated using semi-structured interviews (see the appendix for the general interview protocol) and diary entries recording participants’ reflections on life as a foreign student in China. Each individual interview
lasted 50 to 70 minutes. The interviews focused on collecting the students’ personal history, feelings, attitudes and internal conflicts while learning Chinese, before and after coming to China. Their personal experiences with academics and personal life (such as interactions with different people and various emotions that arose from these experiences), their overall reflections on learning and their perceptions of themselves at the end of the program as learners of Chinese were also highlighted in the interviews. The investigator also attempted to elicit stories that contained strong emotional resonance or intensity that influenced participants’ self-understanding. The interviews were conducted in the students’ preferred language (Thai: 8; Chinese: 1). The first author transcribed and translated the verbal Chinese responses into English. A translator was employed to help with the interview, transcription and translation of Thai to English for the interviews conducted in Thai. A total of 36 interviews (4 interviews for each of the 9 students) were recorded, yielding a corpus of more than 65,000 words of transcription. Original transcriptions and translated versions were sent to the participants for member checking.

The participants were required to maintain a diary in their preferred language, reflecting their feelings and thoughts about the events occurring in their lives in China. The data obtained from their diaries (5 to 7 pieces from each participant, of approximately 800 words per piece) yielded approximately 45,000 words. According to the participants, these diaries were most

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Travel experience to China before the program</th>
<th>Years of learning Chinese language</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Study year in undergraduate</th>
<th>Self-perceived Chinese proficiency level</th>
<th>Pre-departure training</th>
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<td>Charoen</td>
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<td>3rd</td>
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<td>3rd</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mayura</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>3rd</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hiran</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>3rd</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isaree</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Once (1 week)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
representative of their experiences and inner thoughts during the program. The diaries were written in Thai; thus, the same translator was employed to translate the text into English. Participants’ translated diary entries were sent to them for cross-checking and further possible comments to ensure the trustworthiness of the data.

To elicit more information from the participants and gain an in-depth understanding of their identity construction processes, the first author also attempted to establish a rapport with the participants by staying connected with them during the year. This involved personal communication through emails, WeChat, phone calls, and informal meetings in the university canteen and dormitory. Although these types of information were not subjected to data analysis, it helped build a trust between the researcher and the participants.

2.1.4 Discourse analysis of diary and interview data

Discourse analysis was used to analyze the data from the interviews and diaries. This process explored ‘naturally occurring’ language use and set up the relationship between the text and context (Silverman 2001). According to Gao (2012b), discourse is not something external to an individual but one that an individual comes to internalize, as exemplified in pedagogies and classroom practices. Therefore, the discourse analysis approach was adopted to explore how the Thai students imagined their identities and interacted with local people in communities of practice, and how this affected their identity formation. Open coding, axial coding and selective coding were used to generate categories. Based on previous studies (Du 2015, Strauss and Corbin 1990), four rounds of data analysis were conducted. First, the authors coded the data independently through carefully reading and re-reading all of the data. Second, the existing codes were re-examined through repeated comparisons that formed the basis of tentative code categorization, with an emphasis on the relationships between the codes (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Third, the tentative categorization was reorganized, exploring how the students’ identities interacted with their imagined communities and communities of practice. Finally, the authors deconstructed and reconstructed the social meanings of the identified themes (Barkhuizen et al. 2014). The reconstructed narratives were also shared with the participants to validate the data analyses and elicit more insight from them through sharing comments on the data interpretation.
3 Findings

3.1 Pre-departure imagination: Excited but anxious about legitimate community membership

The Thai learners imagined their identity as legitimate Chinese speakers. Six expressed confidence in becoming legitimate members of the host communities. They believed that it would not be difficult for them to acquire individual agency in a new community. They were willing to seek certain educational opportunities which they might otherwise skip. For example, before coming to China, eight students described their feelings as ‘excited’. Related to this, Abhasra reported,

I like traveling to different parts of the world and I see studying in China as a great experience. Through my personal hard work, I will become an authentic Chinese speaker. (Interview 1)

Mayura added,

As long as I can speak the Chinese language, there would be no problem for me living in China. It will also be easy to pick up the Chinese language when you live in that country. (Interview 1)

Four students saw their time in China as an opportunity to secure extrinsic pragmatic gains, e.g. future job prospects. For example, Baenglum stated,

I look forward to studying in China as this will enhance my proficiency in Chinese and help me get a better job in Thailand. (Diary 1)

Six students expressed that studying abroad in China will enhance their cultural awareness and provide a means of exchanging ideas and values with local students, through which they can learn more about and appreciate cultural differences, compare different educational systems, and facilitate their intrinsic personal and professional development. For example, Charoen stated,

I am excited to experience the cultural differences, including those in the educational system, which is good for my future development. (Diary 1)

Students’ willingness to engage in imagined communities strongly influences their identity construction and engagement in learning. It appears that when students imagine themselves bonded with their future community members across time and space, they feel a sense of affiliation with the future community. For example, five of the Thai students imagined that they would become
legitimate members of a Chinese-speaking community, with Chinese as one of the most important means of gaining this future affiliation. These students related their visions of the future to their actions and identities. It seems that this anticipation of the future can be a motivation for them in the present. For example, Darika stated,

China is one of the biggest trading partners of most of the ASEAN countries and may continue to feature prominently in globalization and the One-Belt-One-Road Initiative. I could see the value of studying Chinese in China. (Interview 1)

However, despite their desire to belong to this imagined community, four of the participants also expressed worries about their stay. The main reasons for their anxiety included separation from their family and friends. For example, Ekaluck stated,

The reality of leaving home is pretty scary. I made my whole family drive me to the airport. But ultimately, I had to say goodbye and board the plane by myself. (Interview 1)

Their other worries included health and safety risks and culture shock. News and media seem to be the main influence on students’ imagination and the sense of imagined community independent from their locale. For example, Lawan stated,

I am not sure about life in China. I only know from the news that everything in China is strictly controlled. I am not sure whether I can handle the culture shock, or whether I am safe in China. (Diary 1)

The struggle of locating a possible self can reframe a student’s perception of possibilities in a future community. For example, due to the language proficiency, the Thai students were likely to view themselves as peripheral members of their imagined community, and this affected their willingness to pay efforts in language learning. For example, Isaree stated,

I am worried it might be difficult for me to adapt to life in China as my Chinese is not good. It may be difficult for me to understand the culture here. When you don’t have that proficiency but are suddenly put in a different place, it will be difficult to find a way to learn that language. (Interview 1)

In addition, the Thai students’ imagined communities/identities were influenced by societal and educational discourses and struggles between diverse language ideologies in particular socio-contexts. The Thai learners’ entrenched beliefs or ideas about the status of a specific language, which were established from their sociocultural experiences, affected their attitudes toward it. For example, Hiran reported,
It is difficult to remember the Chinese characters. In addition, English is the most important language in academic settings. We are also very proud of our Thai language. We do not have much room left for learning Chinese. Chinese learning is only for pleasure or interest. (Diary 1)

Overall, prior to departure, while some students looked forward to their life in China, some were apprehensive over a number of issues. Their concerns, influenced by the external media or their internal feelings, centered on separation from family, culture shock, language proficiency, and societal constraints. These apprehensions, when combined with high expectations of the host community as a site for Chinese language learning and use, heightened the emotional charge of their expectations. Their expectations and apprehensions were also invariably articulated in terms of imagined identities within the host community.

### 3.2 Communities of practice: Variations in legitimate membership

The students participated in a wide array of activities that allowed for the mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire that typifies communities of practice, for example, classroom activities, extracurricular activities, academic programs, and social groups. The Thai students were mutually engaged with the members of the community. Their commitment to the community formed the basis for their joint enterprise as Chinese language learners and users. They enhanced their proficiency in Chinese through social interactions. For example, Abhasra, Mayura, and Isaree expressed the same experience. Take Mayura as an example,

The environment was hospitable and Chinese people were very curious about our identity as Thai people and willing to communicate with us. Through joining various classes and extracurricular activities with local Chinese students, I improved my Chinese language proficiency a lot. (Interview 2)

Frequent access to the actual community and opportunities to use Chinese also allowed the students to demonstrate their identities as cross-cultural mediators. Five students perceived that their experience improved their understanding of Chinese culture. For example, Baenglum stated,

Both language and culture are important. The experience in China helps me think about what Chinese people think, how Chinese people feel about world affairs, and how Chinese people go about everyday life, instead of totally relying on the news media. (Diary 2)
Five of the students expressed their identity as a dedicated language learner, which was formed in their communities of practice. They asserted that improvement in their Chinese proficiency served as a motivation for dedicated Chinese learning. For example, Darika stated,

One of the great experiences was that some Chinese people from another city asked me the way to a park. I was so happy to tell them the way using my language skills. It is an encouragement for my Chinese learning. (Interview 3)

Seven students reported that studying and living in China bestowed them with a new perspective. For example, Darika and Ekaluck travelled to other cities in China. They were astonished by the speed of the express trains in China. Darika reported,

I thought China was very backward. But China is very modern with high skyscrapers and high-speed express trains. I am less eager to defend what the news reports nowadays. (Diary 3)

Lawan added,

When there were negative reports in the news about China, I would try to think about why and how from the perspective of Chinese people. (Diary 2)

However, for four students, it was their first visit to China and their identity as a Thai person did not become immediately apparent as their physical appearance was similar to the local Chinese people. Sometimes they were simply recognized as Chinese. They aspired to establish a contrast between self and other, and desired some attention as foreigners. For example, Baenglum stated,

I do not want to be treated as a local because I am different from locals. However, people often think that I am Chinese because of my physical appearance. They treat those westerners differently from us. (Interview 3)

The Thai students attempted to engage in discussions on cultural differences and thus to establish themselves as cross-cultural mediators, but such discussions were often constrained by their ethnocentric perspectives. The only viable option for them was to avoid discussing certain topics with certain interlocutors. They chose to vent to their peers. For example, Ekaluck said,

My Chinese is good, but it is still difficult to talk to some Chinese people about certain political issues. Chinese people have no freedom but they insist that they do. Chinese people regarded the “one belt, one road” initiative as a policy good for the whole world. I perceived it as a political permeation. I would prefer to discuss such issues only with my Thai friends. (Interview 3)
Students experiencing split identity may find it difficult to negotiate their group affiliation. For example, four Thai students said they looked forward to living in China and learning Chinese; however, they later attempted to find their comfort zone. This reversal was quite interesting, as before they came to China they believed that they would be legitimate members of a Chinese community, but after the arrival, they regarded themselves as peripheral members. Related to this unexpected predicament in the imagined and actual communities of practice, Darika stated,

I realized later that I was not so independent, mature, confident, and ready to try new and different things as I believed earlier. I spent most of my time outside of the classroom with international students and perceived what China is like through their eyes. (Diary 4)

Mayura also expressed some comments different from her imagined communities. She reported,

Fluency in Chinese is the result of blood, sweat and tears, not a consequence of studying in China. I learned a lot. But later I found that Chinese is too difficult. It is also difficult for me to join the Chinese community because of the lack of cultural understanding. (Diary 4)

It was repeatedly observed that the Thai students were ripped off by vendors or taxi drivers who noticed that they were not locals (from their accents). The Thai students felt especially vulnerable because they lacked experience with local customs and rules. Their limited language proficiency contributed to these difficulties. For example, Charoen said,

When I attempted to buy something from a vendor, the vendor charged me ten yuan rather than two yuan because I could not express myself well. When I tried to argue with the vendor, I found it difficult to express what I intended to say. I had no choice but to accept the price. (Interview 3)

Although Baenglum could speak quite good Mandarin, she also reported similar experiences that linguistic insufficiency worsened the predicaments and became a hurdle on her way to full membership of the communities of practice. She said,

When I wanted to buy something from a vendor, I was charged fifteen yuan but actually the price was only five yuan. Later I found that it is natural for some vendors to charge higher when you cannot speak the dialect. Do I belong here? (Interview 2)

However, unlike Charoen, Baenglum later placed herself in a stronger position to resolve a similar situation using her language skills. Even when Baenglum had negative experiences, she could defend herself through Chinese. Language
serves as empowerment and capital from survival to social confidence. Baenglum said,

When I calmly told the vendor that other people bought it at a lower price, the vendor became embarrassed and finally offered a lower price. (Interview 3)

Similar to their negative experiences, two students defended themselves and demonstrated a modest connection to local communities using their language skills. Lawan, for example, handled special attention with humour by engaging with the members of a local community. When she was at a park talking to some Chinese people, they reportedly said Renyao (ladyboys) are commonly more beautiful than ladies. She jovially said, ‘Then I wish I were a ladyboy’. This made everybody laugh. Another recurring complaint was that there were many Pianzi (scammers) in China. Abbasra found herself in the strongest position to resolve a situation. For example, she said,

I used a 100 yuan bill withdrawn from a bank to buy something from a vendor. The vendor said he had no change for me and gave it back to me. Later I found the vendor replaced the bill with a counterfeit one. I went back to the store and reported this incident loudly to everybody nearby. The vendor became very embarrassed and gave me back the 100-yuan bill. (Interview 3)

Abbasra also reported a similar incident where she used her language skills to defend herself, saying,

Once I drove a car. A lady suddenly pretended to fall down in front of my car. She asked for money for her injuries. I took ten minutes to tell the woman to leave otherwise I would call the police. I also said I had a lot of friends here. I was grateful for being able to use the Chinese language. (Diary 3)

Overall, in the Thai students’ communities of practice, the degree to which they were able to build desired interactional relationships and enhance Chinese learning varied. Some students reported a positive experience and attributed much of their progress in Chinese learning to social interaction. However, some students expressed a sense of alienation due to cultural misunderstandings. Language learning is enhanced when the practiced communities provide a positive experience and a degree of emotional intensity that comes from a sense of inclusion. Language also plays a role in the resolution of difficulties. For example, some students had the capacity to turn difficult moments to linguistic advantage. On the other hand, those who lack linguistic sufficiency tightened their efforts on their way to become central members of communities of practice.
3.3 Future imagination: I am Thai, not Chinese

In practice, the nine Thai students imagined their desired memberships should belong to their Thai communities. Their imagined identity affects their cultural and language practices. In terms of cultural practices, they did not actively engage with the local community. In terms of language practices, they were unwilling to exert more efforts in learning Chinese. Their negative experiences during their time in China reinforced their national identity toward the end of the program. Their love for their native country became stronger with time. Five students, Isaree, Darika, Ekaluck, Lawan, Hiran, expressed discomfort about their life in China and were very nostalgic about their country. For example, Isaree expressed intrinsic reasons,

I miss Facebook, Twitter, and Line. Although I want to share my life with my friends, most of the apps I used in Thailand are blocked in China. I miss my friends. I miss Thailand. (Interview 3)

She also wrote in her diary,

It is difficult for me to continue my Chinese learning. I learnt a few words before I came to China. Then after one year, I only learnt some basic Chinese. My future is in Thailand. I will be a primary school teacher. Then it is not so important for me to learn Chinese. (Diary 2)

Darika expressed similar feelings. Although her father moved to Thailand from China thirty years ago, she insisted on asserting her identity as Thai after living in China. She reported,

Although many people assume that I am Chinese and I speak Chinese well, I chose to speak Thai and attempted to enforce my identity as Thai. My motive to come to China was to find out why my father left China. After staying in China, I am fundamentally Thai. (Interview 4)

In her fourth diary entry, Darika seemed to have discovered why. She wrote,

Although the economy is developing rapidly in China, the quality of life is better in Thailand, and it is happier in Thailand. We have more human rights. (Diary 4)

Finally, the five students expressed a feeling of alienation from the local communities and it would be impossible to gain authentic access to them. Ekaluck stated,

It is impossible to build social and institutional relations within the local communities. Chinese people always think we are foreigners. Being a foreigner in China means being an outsider. (Interview 4)
In addition, the five students’ trajectories in their imagined future communities were concrete and tangible. They regarded life in China as temporary and even ephemeral, which may not worth their effort of gaining full membership of local communities. While their imagined transnational communities existed in relation to their past experiences, they were unable to build future images that matched the images of the communities they left behind. This situation caused a new type of incongruence between these images, influencing their negotiation of membership or identity. Under this circumstance, the Thai students rejected their efforts to renew their existing membership. For example, Hiran also stated extrinsic reasons,

I wanted to make an effort and to be one of the legitimate members of the local community. However, the policy in China is not open but very confined and inconvenient for a foreigner. As a foreigner, you can never be a real part of the community. (Diary 4)

The five students’ struggles seemed to influence the formation of their imagined communities. For example, it is difficult for Thai people to obtain work visa in China. It seems that striving to achieve one convergent end did not seem to be a homogeneous and unitary process. The Thai learners expressed challenges in moving from ‘peripheral members’ to ‘legitimate participants’ (Lave and Wenger 1991). For example, Darika stated,

As a Chinese learner, I thought I could be a local member here. But finally, when I decided to find a job, I found that getting a work visa is almost impossible. I was only a traveller in China. (Interview 4)

However, mutual engagement with local communities, which revolves around joining in extracurricular activities with locals, partly compensates for the sense of exclusion discussed above. The activities include cultural feasts and drinking activities such as going out to bars, clubs, and house parties. Engaging in these activities leads to a shared repertoire of places, activities, and stories with the Chinese locals. A willingness to communicate with local students seems to play a part. The proficiency in Chinese functions as empowerment and social capital. Four students, Baenglum, Charoen, Mayura, and Abhasra, expressed their unwillingness to leave this community. Take Abhasra as an example,

We took part in many extracurricular activities here. We were able to communicate with Chinese people. We spoke about all the things that are different in the culture here and in Thailand ... What kind of clothes are for traditional festivals, what do you think about girls in China and Thailand, what do you think of gay marriage ... responsibilities for girls to support their families, and everything like that, and this is important to me, and it is cool and interesting. We are culturally and socially connected. I will miss the life here. (Interview 4)
Charoen imagined a membership that could blend both Chinese and Thai culture. She preferred a new or blended cultural pattern and imagined her self-identification in a combined manner. Related to these new aspects of her identity, Charoen wrote in her diary,

I am a Thai, but I also speak Chinese. In the future, I will use these two languages as a cultural mediator. I am thus in an advantageous position while competing with Chinese and Thai counterparts. (Diary 3)

Baenglum also wrote,

While the contexts of China and Thailand may be different, the two countries are close, either in space, society, or culture. We are similar to Chinese people, either physically or philosophically. We are willing to communicate with them because we trust them. (Diary 4)

Overall, towards the end of the program, some students failed to acculturate but chose to dwell on their national identity, while some students were better adapting to the local culture. Failure or unwillingness to blend into local communities and actualize their imagined identity is related to the perceived openness, or rather, closeness of the host communities. Those Thai students who were not able to renew their membership were perceived as self-contained and conservative for anything outlandish. Their rather disappointingly perceived reality in China strengthened their national identification. On the other hand, factors, including features of the second language itself, higher proficiency levels in the second language, and the social interactions in the host community, may enable learners to more easily engage in identity negotiation and self-presentation.

4 Discussion

This qualitative study attempts to explain the changes in Thai students’ language use and their engagement with their host communities while studying in China, from the perspectives of identity, imagined communities, and communities of practice. Overall, the different struggles the students faced in relation to social integration, adaptation, incorporation, and assimilation present a complex image of inclusion-exclusion for newcomers to a host community, in line with previous studies on studying abroad (e.g. Du 2015, Kinginger 2004, Müller and Schmenk 2017). The Thai students envisioned belonging to an imagined community while studying in China. However, the extent to which they participated in communities of practice varied widely. Some students demonstrated
identities of cross-cultural mediators and dedicated language learners, opening
channels for interaction within the host community. However, others encoun-
tered challenges in identity formation when the realities of the host community
did not align with their imaginations. They retreated from local communities
and strengthened their own national identities. Finally, some learners chose to
reconstruct their identities as peripheral members of the host communities while
some attempted to maintain bonds with the host communities.

Clearly benefiting from the exchange program, some of the students, i.e.
Abhasra, Mayura, and Isaree, reported that they enhanced their Chinese lan-
guage proficiency through social interactions. These individuals developed more
socio-pragmatic awareness and intercultural sensitivity, and were more willing
to engage in intercultural interactions, as suggested by Jackson (2017). However,
the findings in the present study also underscore the idiosyncratic nature of
studying abroad. In Mayura’s imagined world, she held the idea that “As long as
I can speak the Chinese language, there would be no problem for me living in
China”. After discovering differences in the host communities, she felt deprived
of more sophisticated intercultural perspectives. Likewise, Darika changed her
viewpoint from “China is one of the biggest trading partners of most of the
ASEAN countries, and may continue to feature prominently in globalization and
the One-Belt-One-Road Initiative” to eventually state, “when I encounter cul-
tures, I realize how much better my own culture is”. Baenglum initially formed
her identity as a “foreigner” or “traveller” in China without being sensitive to
cultural differences. She then defended herself against these differences. She felt
under siege, so she stereotyped herself as simplistic, and protected herself by
enforcing a hard boundary between herself and others. After engaging in extra-
curricular activities with local Chinese people, Baenglum seemed to believe that
at their core they were the same, either physically or philosophically. This
assumption of similarity was then invoked to recognize her own cultural pat-
terns, understand others, and eventually minimize differences. To Baenglum,
“contexts differ, but when you really get to know Chinese people, they are quite
similar to us”. Charoen’s imagined identity as a bilingual user also affected her
cultural identifications and language practices. It appears that an imagined
identity develops in an imagined community, and the imagined identity brings
possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options, involving the confluence
between the heritage culture and the receiving culture in terms of identifications
and values.

The findings in this research show discursive processes of identity construc-
tion, which makes a slight contrast to the Bennet’s (2004) proposal of stages in
intercultural competence, which involves denial, defense and minimization as
the ethnocentric stages, and acceptance, adaptation, and integration as the
ethnorelative stages. For example, Baenglum first experienced denial of cultural differences, then became more adept at discriminating differences, and finally, a shared repertoire of practices in the host community guided her to interact with the dominant culture and recognize the cultural dimensions of the interaction. This may have been different for Darika, who experienced a process of acceptance–defense–denial, a reverse process to Bennett’s (2004) model. She first imagined the value of being engaged with the Chinese community, then experienced the threat associated with cultural differences and later started defending themselves. Her experience in the defense stage gradually strengthened the idea that her own culture was the only viable one. Hence, orientations towards cultural differences may not be arranged along a continuum from the more monocultural mindsets of denial and defense to the transitional orientation of minimization. These processes are compared with Bennett’s (2004) proposal and visualized in Figure 1. Learners’ study abroad experience becomes more complex when the imagined communities and communities of practice are misaligned and a non-linear progression may occur. For example, due to unpleasant intercultural experiences or acute culture shock, as in the case of Charoen who felt vulnerable from being mistreated by scammers in China, the students were likely to retreat from their new communities. Therefore, the Thai students displayed a range of complex individual differences, and environmental factors and extralinguistic variables affected their identity development toward target language learning/use and significantly affected the way their experiences unfolded.

### Stages of intercultural competence development

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<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Ethnocentric stages</th>
<th>Ethnorelative stages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This Study (Baenglum)</td>
<td>Denial → Defense → Adaptation → Acceptance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Study (Darika)</td>
<td>Denial → Defense → Acceptance</td>
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**Figure 1:** A contrast between Bennett (2004) and the current study.
The findings in this study suggest a need to re-conceptualize imagined community of the Thai students. First, imagination affects language learners’ identity negotiation and language practice. For example, Abhasra, Baenglum, Darika and Hiran envisioned themselves as legitimate members of the Chinese community, which fuelled them with extra efforts to learn pedagogies and practices. To belong to this community, they demonstrated identities of dedicated language learners and cross-cultural mediators. Second, despite their desire to belong to these imagined communities, they were involved in communities of practice to different extents. For example, while the communities of practice allowed Abhasra and Baenglum to become dedicated learners, Darika and Hiran felt trapped within the community of practice and lacked the motivation for their pre-determined learning goals. Third, some students were unsure about whether to retreat. For example, although Baenglum wanted to leave, their imagined future trajectories rendered the planned departure difficult, as observed in Wenger’s (1998) proposal that the boundaries of communities of practice keep insiders in and outsiders out. In addition, as shown in Abhasra, Charoen, and Baenglum’s unwillingness to leave the host community, social interactions transform and solidify the students’ language proficiency, and offer them a new imagined community of multilingual individuals and legitimate Chinese language users. Finally, we need to consider the reciprocal relationship between imagined future communities and the students’ past and present experiences. For example, Charoen’s future trajectories of developing an identity as a cultural mediator guided her current language learning practices. Her imagination was also conditioned in part by her past experiences, e.g. her prior Chinese proficiency and pre-departure training. As conceptualized by Kanno and Norton (2003), students are often informed by their past and present experiences, and then imagination allows them to construct images of themselves and their communities. As argued by Benson et al. (2012), imagined communities affect learners’ transnational language practices on a continuum of past and future communities while they try to negotiate membership of their past, current, and (sought after) future communities. Bearing these issues in mind, we argue that imagined community during study abroad should be re-conceptualized as a notion in ongoing process. Anderson (1991) focused on the “emergence” of nationalism as an imagined community but ignored the transformative process during study abroad; that is, how the imagination of a community may “evolve” over time during study abroad. Therefore, we propose a transformative imagined community, e.g. the imagination of national communities is not static but ongoing with constant tensions and conflicts. Rather than “becoming” or “being” imagined communities (Anderson 1991), learners’ imagined communities is a discursive, ongoing, and pervasive process during study abroad.
Complementary to previous findings, proximity affects the Thai students’ communities of practice. The students exhibited uneven patterns of separation from their previous communities. For example, Mayura lacked fluency in Chinese, thus she experienced somewhat higher levels of separation from her host community. However, even Darika and Ekaluck, who were fluent in Chinese, reported that they felt highly segregated from their host communities because of the complication concerning the work visa. This changed their behavior in response to a real or imagined external influence. For example, encountering great differences in their host communities strengthened their gradual identification with Thailand and their identities as Thai, as in the cases of Abhasra, Darika, Ekaluck, and Hiran. However, two other students, Baenglum and Mayura, expressed their unwillingness to leave China. First, we need to consider the factor of spatial proximity, i.e., vicinity in space, as opposed to a long distance (geographical and time distance) between two places or peoples. For example, Baenglum reported that Thai and Chinese people are physically or philosophically similar due to the geographical closeness of the two countries. Due to this spatial proximity, Baenglum reported a possibility for the Thai learners to share knowledge with the Chinese students, because they trust them more and perceive a greater likelihood of reciprocation. Social proximity, i.e., similar socioeconomic conditions, and cultural proximity, i.e., cultural similarities, helped the Thai students establish relationships with the locals. The spatial, social, and cultural proximities of Thailand and China allowed all forms of indirect communication, undoubtedly playing an irreplaceable role, which supports the use of good manners and contributes to the manufacture of resemblances between the ways of life. However, this issue was not noticed in previous studies (e.g. Du 2015, Jackson 2017, Trentman 2013). These are important dimensions to be considered when interpreting why some of the Thai students’ imagined communities or identities did not collapse, as in the cases of Baenglum and Mayura. They, in fact, found shared communities with the locals, where they were not only unified by language but also by their history, religion, and culture. These shared traits are regarded as shared identities, which are formed when people believe they have generally similar social norms, clothing styles or living patterns, etc.

The findings suggest the complex identity development of the Thai students. While studying in China, the Thai students encountered different customs, practices, and beliefs, which questioned or even challenged their views in addition to prompting changes to their identity. The fact that the Thai students while study in China have salient identity development is not surprising, as identity is established or strengthened through others (Meinhof and Galasinski 2005). Identity development follows the view that a 'self' is not fixed but easily
changeable (Bruner 1990). However, satisfactory identity negotiation comes from feeling understood and respected (Ting-Toomey 2005). For example, when Abhasra, Mayura, and Isaree felt valued, they felt they were legitimate Chinese speakers and an enhancement in language proficiency. Their confidence using Chinese boosted their positive self-image and led to a positive sense of being legitimate, respected, and valued members of the host community. Thus, the process of the Thai students’ identity formation and negotiation were underpinned by their individual trajectories in their communities of practice. This process demonstrates how various aspects of identity may be perceived and treated in a target culture, wherein different social norms, cultural mores, and local practices, and the Thai learners’ attempts to resolve the conflicts that underlie ambivalence make this process challenging or rewarding. Their identities are secured, strengthened, and altered by means of complex identification. They incorporated these identities within themselves, principally through the process of habituation, where the rules, norms, and ideals constitute this complex process.

Therefore, when faced with diversity and variations in actual practices and membership, some students, e.g. Charoen and Mayura, had imagined identities in conjunction with their imagined communities but some, e.g. Ekaluck and Lawan, did not. This should be seen from a negotiation of identity perspective rather than a linear process from ‘peripheral’ to ‘legitimate’ (Lave and Wenger 1991). This alignment appears to be related to the Thai students’ experience of boundary construction and crossing. The boundaries that were constructed between their different identities at different stages, combined with the boundaries they encountered within communities, may have marginalized their efforts while they negotiated the meaning of learning. While engagement drives imagination, it may be a source of conflict and dissociation, making it difficult for some Thai learners to become full community participants. The ways in which these boundaries shaped the Thai students’ identities suggest a dual mode of alignment – an uncompromising allegiance to their own culture as well as the need for compliance with the demands of the host community. Identity, in this regard, is related to the range of symbolic capital necessary to successfully navigate the process of study abroad (Thomas 2013), and is in flux and contextually influenced, complex, fluid, ambivalent, and even paradoxical during study abroad.

Finally, it is argued that the Thai students’ interest in Chinese language learning are not guaranteed during their study in China, and this is related to their imagined communities. There are a variety of ways in which study abroad can be approached and interpreted. For example, the participants’ previous language proficiency affected their identity negotiation during study abroad.
(Kinginger, 2013), and as also argued by Kinginger (2013), the pre-departure training may affect their communities of practice. For example, Abhasra and Charoen, who had received such training, seemed to present a more positive attitude towards participation in informal dialogues with members of their host communities, articulating appropriate goals, and preparing to make the most of their sojourn. Those who do not become sufficiently or meaningfully engaged in the practices of their local host communities may be because they lack guidance in handling issues before study abroad. However, Darika, who also received training, demonstrated a lack of intercultural awareness. It seems that the reasons for this lack of engagement, understood from the data in the present study, are myriad, including, (a) a retreat into national superiority based on observations about cultural practices (Du 2015); (b) tendency to be tied to an electronic umbilical cord or an immense personal library of home-based media (Kinginger 2011); (c) a failure to observe, participate, and reflect or introspect on their language learning experiences in study abroad settings; (d) students’ de-emphasis on language learning in favour of other goals, such as accumulating symbolic capital through tourism (Teng 2017); (e), the students’ imagined communities and their chosen identity assign a lower status to the target language, which influences their imagined future in the positioning of individual subject and the practices related to culture and language learning (Man et al. 2018).

5 Conclusions and implications

Drawing upon the concepts of identity, imagined communities, and communities of practice, this study provides insights into how Thai students studying abroad navigate the complex challenges of linguistic and cultural learning in China under the bigger context of its OBOR national strategy. Overall, responses to the multi-layered experience and social contexts of Chinese learning are tied up with projection and recognition of identities, and the Thai students are dominated by experiences and perceptions of inclusion and exclusion. This identity negotiation process mediated their sense of belonging to imagined communities of Chinese speakers, and their self-perceived Chinese competency. Although some were more successful than others in self-directed endeavors, the Thai students envisioned a future beyond their current situation and created identities to negotiate their positions with respect to their interlocutors and their context.

This study was limited by its low number of participants; however, given the length of time required for the research and data triangulation, it pinpoints a
need to capture the multidimensionality of identities of Thai students in China. It also highlights the need for educators, policymakers and researchers of Chinese language learners in global contexts to problematize assumptions about the meanings and goals of Chinese language learning for Thai and other foreign students.

The following implications can be derived from the findings. First, to increase Thai students’ success in communities whose practices may or may not align with their imagined communities, educators in study abroad programs should consider providing relevant ethnographic training to develop students’ intercultural sensitivity, including their ability to critically contemplate cultural dichotomies and strategies for both linguistic and cultural learning. It is also necessary to emphasize the need to encourage realistic goal-setting in pre-travel orientations. Second, the Thai students in this study appreciated the inclusion of more local students in extracurricular activities, whereby interested local and international students could mingle. Such initiatives are beneficial for both foreigners and local students. Hence, a study abroad program should provide substantial time and opportunities for continuous interaction with local networks. Finally, if the members of host communities treat Thai students as legitimate language learners and users, and value their knowledge and experience, Thai students’ motivation to learn the target language may be strengthened. Through related instruction on cross-cultural communication, hybrid and multilingual identities may find their way, wherein Thai students in China can view themselves, and be perceived by others, as legitimate members of their host communities.

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References


**Appendix Sample questions for interview**

1. What motivates you to learn Chinese?
2. Could you please share with us some stories or interesting experiences related to your Chinese language learning?
3. What difficulties have you encountered for learning Chinese?
4. What is the difference in terms of learning Chinese in Thailand and China?
5. Could you please share with us some interesting stories happened to you after coming to China?
6. How do you perceive yourself after learning Chinese?
7. What personally and professionally have you gained after this exchange program?
8. What emotional anecdotes do you want to share with us during your life in China?