Multiracial Chinese American women studying abroad in China: The intersectionality of gender, race, and language learning

WENHAO DIAO [a]

YI WANG [b]

[a] *University of Arizona, USA*
wdiao@arizona.edu

[b] *Emory University, USA*
yi.wang3@emory.edu

Abstract

This case study addresses the theme of mobility and intercultural education by focusing on the study abroad experience of three multiracial Chinese Americans in China. Research on study abroad and language learning has shown the salience of gender in intercultural learning, but women from minoritized groups have rarely been the focus in the literature. Meanwhile, heritage language speakers may encounter complex negotiations of identity and belonging while studying abroad in their "ancestral homeland" (e.g., Jing-Schmidt *et al.*, 2016). Multiracial women, who may linguistically be categorized as heritage speakers, have to respond to the challenges to which study abroad women are subjected and also make sense of their gendered ethnoracial identity. In this study, we focus on the experience of three multiracial Chinese American women. In our findings, gender emerged as a frequent theme across all focal participants, and their responses to their gendered experience aligned with their various interpretations of their multiracial Chinese identity. The results highlight the intersectionality of gender and race for women from minoritized backgrounds. We conclude that intercultural education should recognize the multiplicities of identity among our students and adopt a descriptive approach that acknowledges cultural identity to be fluid and evolving.

Keywords: Study abroad, gender, race, Chinese, case study

Introduction

This special issue is dedicated to a discussion of how current models of intercultural communication

may be oversimplified and transnational mobility potentially romanticized. As a type of educational migration, study abroad represents a particular case of transnational mobility and intercultural learning. While it has often been presented as an inherently intercultural experience in popular media (Kubota, 2016), study abroad is in fact a nuanced process that is linked to social regimes of identity production, inclusion, and exclusion in different countries (Park & Bae, 2009). In this case study, we provide a critique of popular assumptions about intercultural learning by focusing on the study abroad experience of three multiracial Chinese American women.

According to census data, multiracial Americans are now the fastest growing demographic group in the U.S., and their experiences are challenging conventional concepts of racial categorizations (Parker *et al*., 2015). Due to histories of racial tensions and oppression in the U.S., multiracial Americans used to conceal their non-White heritage (Khanna & Johnson, 2010). Today many Americans of mixed race still do not consider themselves multiracial, but a majority of them proudly embrace their multiple racial identities amidst calls for racial justice (Parker *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, as evidenced in narratives such as that of Vice President-elect Kamala Harris (2020), multiracial Americans are often children of immigrants (Lee & Bean, 2004), and therefore their identity (re)negotiation processes further involve reinterpreting the transnational mobility their parents have undergone and the multiple cultural belongings to which they are subjected. Multiracial Americans studying abroad in a country that is associated with their racial heritage pose further intricate questions related to the multiplicity and fluidity of identity.

In this study we investigate the negotiation of identity by focusing on three multiracial Chinese female students who studied abroad in China. As the focal students were women, we further draw upon the notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to reveal the complexities of identity in transnational processes. Our research questions are: 1) How did these multiracial women respond to their gendered identity that emerged in intercultural interactions with their Chinese peers, and 2) How did their responses to gender intersect with their multiracial identity.

In what follows, we begin by discussing traditional approaches to intercultural education and their limitations. By examining the focal women's interpretations and discursive positionings of their gendered multiracial identities when studying abroad, we argue for a reconceptualization of intercultural learning as a transcultural process in which individuals have to also (re)interpret and (re)construct other categories of identity, such as gender and race. We conclude with the recommendation that intercultural educators ought to adopt a descriptive (rather than prescriptive) approach to intercultural communication and promote a socially inclusive agenda of student mobility and intercultural education.

Literature Review

Rethinking Intercultural Communication as Transcultural Identity Processes

Intercultural communication has traditionally been defined as "how people experience and handle cultural difference" (Bennett, 2013, p. 1199). Thus, in intercultural communication research, the focus has traditionally involved the ways in which people communicate differently when they deal with outsiders of their community in contrast to those understood as insiders. This emphasis on cultural differences between groups has shaped how the research theorizes, investigates, and models what competence in intercultural communication should entail/incorporate/etc. (Bennett, 2013).

Moreover, traditional approaches to intercultural communication or intercultural competence tend to focus on categorizing cultures as statically different from each other, which results in models that

essentialize cultures as both fixed and fixated (Holliday *et al.*,2010). For instance, Hofstede's model of intercultural communication (Hofstede, 2015) postulates that national cultures can be compared against one another using five predetermined dimensions (e.g., power distance, individualism vs. collectivism), and intercultural communication is understood as conditioned by these differences in national cultures. In the context of language teaching and learning, this difference-oriented prescriptive approach has led to uncritical, stereotypical representations of culture and people (Kubota, 2016, p. 353). This approach also tends to view students' home societies as monolithic, e.g., American students are often assumed to be English monolingual and White. Furthermore, individuals also are seen to have pre-fixed national and cultural identities; yet, culture is diverse and continuously shifting even within a nation's geographical borders (Kubota, 2016), and identity in intercultural communication is also not static or predetermined (Block, 2013). In their critique of traditional conceptualizations of intercultural communication, Dervin and Gross (2016) argue that cultural boundaries are particularly fluid in today's world:

> [Intercultural Communication] is problematic in a world like ours where boundaries are loose and ideas, thoughts, practices, discourses, beliefs and so on travel the world so quickly. Commonalities can cut across countries, regions, languages, religions and so on. … We argue … that an emphasis on similarities does not necessarily lead to universalistic perspectives but to 'unidiversalism' (diversities in difference and commonality).
>
> From this perspective, scholars and students of intercultural education are better served with a descriptive approach that critically analyzes how our knowledge is "constructed by discourses that reflect and produce particular relations of power." (p. 353)

Compatible with this descriptivist approach of intercultural communication is a recognition that cultural identity is not predetermined by national origin, but instead it is multidimensional and subject to negotiation (Gee, 2001). Individuals are not only members of their national cultures, but also have multiple social identities that intersect and may sometimes even conflict with one another. These identities emerge in social interaction, and they are also negotiated through language and other socially meaningful performances (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Individuals who move across national borders, therefore, have links with different sets of cultures and languages, and their identities are multiple and transnational. Originating in migration studies (e.g., Calgar, 2010), transnationalism refers to the "ever-increasing multiplicity of links and interactions between and among migrants" (Block, 2013, p. 127). A focus on multiplicity (dealing with several cultures simultaneously) rather than consequentiality (from one culture to the other culture) reveals that intercultural learning among people who move across borders is a socially contingent process of subjectively (re)presenting oneself discursively and psychologically through the use of multiple symbolic systems (Kramsch, 2009). From this perspective, what study abroad students encounter when overseas is not simply intercultural communication but rather episodes of transcultural communication through which they enact their self-making projects.

Gender and (the Absence of) Intersectionality in Study Abroad

In study abroad research, gender identity is frequently reported as a salient theme. A quantitative study based on American students learning Russian in Russia reported that gender was a significant factor that influenced students' learning outcomes (Brecht *et al.*, 1995). Qualitative examinations from the same research team (Polanyi, 1995) argue that women experienced gendered challenges such as sexual harassment while studying abroad, with which their male cohorts did not typically

have to cope. Numerous case studies since then have illustrated various kinds of challenges that women may face while studying abroad, such as in Argentina (Isabelli-Garcia, 2006), Brazil (Anya, 2017), Costa Rica (Twombly, 1995), France (Kinginger, 2008; Kline, 1998), and Spain (Talburt & Stewart, 1999). These challenges include difficulty in accessing local communities while abroad and having to mediate between different culturally embedded discourses surrounding their gendered behaviors. Discourses around gender and expectations for gendered behaviors vary in different languages and cultures, and the findings in the study abroad highlight that language and intercultural learning in study abroad is a gendered experience (Kinginger, 2009). Moreover, language use closely intertwines with the production and maintenance of gendered identities in transnational contexts (Piller & Takahashi, 2010). Some languages may have forms that index specific gendered roles that do not exist in study abroad students' native language(s), and therefore women have to relearn and sometimes renegotiate gender performances as they speak their target language (Diao, 2016; Siegal, 1996). Yet, while few studies mention gender as a relevant dimension of their focal students' racialized lives (Anya, 2017; Talburt & Stewart, 1999), the research on gender often focuses on White women or simply pays little attention to the women's racial/ethnic identity.

The notion of intersectionality was initially proposed to critique the marginalization of women of color in American discourses of feminism and civil rights. In her book titled *Aint' I a woman: Black women and feminism*, bell hooks (1981) famously argued that an understanding of how gender organizes social lives requires an analysis of how gender intersects with other identities such as race. While focusing on Black women's experience with legal systems, Crenshaw (1989) coined the term *intersectionality* and argued that, despite feminist and civil rights movements, women of color still encounter marginalization, because these discourses often center either on race (the civil rights movement, for example, tends to focus on Black men) or gender (feminist writings tend to focus on White women), but not both. Intersectionality has since led to academic discussions regarding how institutional discourses have overlooked the experiences of women of color. Work in Black feminism and Ethnic Studies with a focus on gender has been at the center of the literature on intersectionality (Cho *et al.*, 2013).

Even though intersectionality is "poignantly relevant" to research on study abroad (Ortega, 2021), there is still not an explicit focus on how race may intersect with gender to influence language learning and use within this field (Block & Corona, 2016; De Costa & Norton, 2017). Struggles with intersectionality can be even more epitomized among women who identify both as heritage speakers and as having multiple ethnoracial heritages when they study abroad. They may also be subject to a variety of different social positions due to discourses of racialization, their experiences with language learning, and their negotiations of multiple belongings or not belongings can be complex. Thus, a focus on women from minoritized ethnoracial backgrounds can serve as a starting point to improve our understanding of language, identity, and intersectionality in transcultural processes.

Race and Language Learning Abroad

Although there continues to be a lack of focus on intersectionality, study abroad researchers are increasingly aware of the importance of addressing the racial(ized) identities of students of color and other ethnically minoritized populations who study abroad. Many recent publications have investigated the experience among Black students who study abroad (Anya, 2017; Diao, 2020; Du, 2018; Goldoni, 2018; Talburt & Stewart, 1999) and heritage learners studying abroad in the country associated with their ethnoracial and/or linguistic heritage (Diao, 2017; Jing-Schmidt *et al.*, 2016; Quan, 2018). While some studies show Black students experience racialization and microaggression (Goldoni, 2018), others actually highlight the potential of studying abroad as a way for American students of color to experience an alternative to the pandemic of racism in the U.S. (Anya, 2017;

Diao, 2020; Du, 2018).

The issue of ethnoracial identity can be more nuanced and complicated for heritage speakers when they study abroad (Du, 2018). As either first-generation immigrants themselves or children of immigrants, heritage speakers in the U.S. are the manifestation of how the social regime of race not only (re)produced identity based on color, but also on the language that individuals (are perceived to) speak (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Yet when they study in their "ancestral homeland" (Jing-Schmidt *et al.*, 2016), many also experience a mismatch between their actual knowledge of and proficiency in the heritage language and local expectations for their language based on their ethnicity (e.g., Diao, 2017; Du, 2018). Thus, while heritage speakers may appear to simultaneously have multiple links within different languages and cultures (e.g., He, 2014), they may also experience racialization and have to negotiate belonging in either and both societies.

Although heritage speakers can include students from very diverse backgrounds, so far the term of "heritage speakers" has rarely been used to describe multiracial learners in the literature. While the already cited complications heritage speakers experience when studying abroad are very relevant, they may not be the same for multiracial students, because they may have different experiences with racialization. Drawing from the notion of intersectionality in feminist social studies (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Cho *et al.*, 2013; hooks, 1981) and the study abroad research on gender and race, this study investigates the intersectionality of gender, race, and language learning in the study abroad context by focusing on the experience of multiracial, female, Chinese learners.

Methodology

Participants

The three focal students in this study, Tiffany, Elisa, and Mae, were all White and Chinese biracial women who studied abroad in China in the fall of 2016. They were purposefully selected (Duff, 2008) from a larger project that involved 17 U.S.-based study abroad students and their 17 Chinese roommates. In a preliminary analysis of the dataset, we investigated how gender came to organize language use among the female study abroad students in China. While the theme of gender recurred across many female participants, discussions about sexualization of the body tended to occur particularly more among these three multiracial women. The results from that pilot study led us to realize that the multiracial Chinese women's experiences could be distinctive from their White peers as well as other heritage Chinese students. The three women became focal cases in this study to highlight the intersectionality of identity in transcultural learning experience.

Despite their shared multiracial identity, the three focal women came from different backgrounds. Tiffany was raised in a single-parent household in the US, speaking mostly Mandarin with her mother at home. She went on to attend a Chinese language flagship program at a U.S. university before coming to China to study abroad. Elisa's mother barely used any Chinese because she grew up in the United States when multilingualism was perceived to harm the acquisition of English. Elisa had spent a significant portion of her childhood with her parents in several countries, including several years in Beijing where she learned Mandarin. Meanwhile, Mae was raised trilingually in Hong Kong, speaking Cantonese, Mandarin, and English, and attended Mandarin-English bilingual schools. The three focal participants also studied in different locations and programs. Tiffany was in Shanghai, while Elisa and Mae were in the same cohort at an intensive program in Beijing. Tiffany and Elisa were placed into advanced-high level Chinese language classes, while Mae was superior and taking classes with local Chinese students. They all lived with Chinese roommates during their time in China.

Data Collection

The data presented here in this study came from semi-structured interviews, audio recordings, and observations from site visits. The interviews were conducted individually with each of the 17 study abroad students, once at the beginning of their program in China and the other at the end. At the beginning of their time in China, they were also each given an audio recorder and instructed to record their routine conversations with their Chinese hosts – either roommates if they lived on campus or host families if they had one. The first author conducted site visits to each of the programs for at least a week, during which she also had informal conversations with the participants informally and took notes.

Analysis

Following recent scholarship on identity and language learning in study abroad (Anya, 2017), a case study approach was adopted, and the analysis was conducted in a qualitative and interpretive fashion. Within- and cross- case analyses (Merriam, 1998) were performed to identify recurring themes both across the three focal participants and within each individual case study. Focused and axial coding were conducted to categorize these recurring themes (Saldaña, 2016). The coding software NVivo was used for all transcripts of conversations, and the interview data were manually coded. Discourse analysis was performed using the data from the interviews and conversations to reveal how these women construct their identity discursively.

Findings

Tiffany: "I am Chinese. My mom is Chinese."

The gendered identity was a recurring theme in the data from Tiffany. Similar to other American women in the study abroad literature (e.g., Kinginger, 2009), Tiffany encountered sexualization and sexual harassment. She described in her interview, and in the recorded conversation, two instances in which middle-aged men approached her and her friends while they were eating or drinking. However, in previous research American women often only mentioned experiencing sexual harassment during study abroad (e.g., Polanyi, 1995; Talburt & Stewart, 1999), but Tiffany stated that as a Chinese woman she had encountered similar behaviors while dealing with Chinese men in the United States as well. She further had the following conversation with her roommate Wing.

1	Wing:	%Chinese old guy like they like to like they hang out and drink
2		like they want a girl (inaudible)%
3	Tiffany:	%young girls%
4	Wing:	%yea%
5	Tiffany:	%so weird, and I know that [another girl] she got to like% 日本的酒吧
		so weird, and I know that [another girl] she got to like a Japanese bar
6		%and there is like two old men just like I guess kind of drunk
7		but not and not super old and like%
8		给我们再买再买再买给我们买很多%drinks%
		Let us buy more buy more buy more let us buy a lot of drinks.
9		我觉得如果你想 %if you want to find like money and drink like%
		I think if you want- if you want to find like money and drink like
10	Wing:	%yea%
11	Tiffany:	在上*海不是*太难
		It's not too hard in Shanghai.

Here, both Tiffany's roommate, Wing, and Tiffany constructed this persona of creepy, middle-aged Chinese men approaching young girls and buying them drinks, whether in the US or China. This acknowledgment indexed their shared ethnically and culturally gendered Chinese identity. As Wing identified this form of sexual harassment as recognizable behaviors by Chinese men (line 1), Tiffany further elaborated to jointly construct not only a shared gender identity with her roommate, but also a shared knowledge as an ethnically Chinese woman.

Being ethnically Chinese was a highly salient theme in Tiffany's data. While she was born to a White American father and an ethnically Chinese mother, she was raised in the U.S. by only her mother and her mother's side of the family. Throughout her interviews and audio recordings, she made frequent references to her mother to make claims regarding her Chinese identity. In the excerpt below, she linked her mother to her ethnicity and her proficiency in Mandarin:

1   Author X: 那你现在在中国有没有人说你看起来像中国人
             Then you are now in China. Did anyone say you look like Chinese?
2   Tiffany: 大部分不会。不会。我觉得
             Most people won't. No, I think.
3   Author X: 那你会不会告诉别人
             Would you tell others?
4   Tiffany: 我会！
             I would.
5   Author X: 你怎么说呢？
             How do you say it?
6   Tiffany: 如果他们说，啊你的中文这么好！
             If they say ah your Chinese is so good!
7   我就说，我就是中国人，我妈妈是中国人。
             I just say I am Chinese. My mom is Chinese.
8   Author X: Oh［你说你说］
             Oh you say you say-
9   Tiffany: ［我觉得　　］这我有点- 不是骄傲。不是骄傲。就是不对。
             I think this I'm a bit- not proud. Not proud. Just- not right-.
10   有一点骄傲我也是中国人，所以我的中文这么好。
             I'm a bit proud that I am also Chinese. That's why my Chinese is so good.

The excerpt was from her interview, in which Tiffany described herself as 中国人 (Chinese, but literally meaning a "middle-kingdom-person"). This Chinese term of *zhongguoren* can mean both a Chinese national and a person of Chinese heritage, and therefore it can obscure ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship. Tiffany justifies her identity claim by linking herself to her mother ("My mother is Chinese"), and further links her ethnic identity to her proficiency in a language that is not English (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Tiffany had never been to mainland China prior to her study abroad trip. As a child, she was sent to weekend community Chinese language schools – a common experience among Chinese heritage speakers in North America (He, 2014) – which she resented and stopped attending not long afterwards (interview). But she resumed learning Mandarin in college, when she discovered her public university had a federally-funded Chinese Language Flagship program. She explained in her interview that her decision to restart learning Mandarin was not only due to the potential of Mandarin being an asset on the job market, but also her way of making sense of her family history and identity. According to the interviews with Tiffany, her grandparents left Shanghai to flee the Japanese

invasion during WWII and the following rise of Mao. They escaped to Hong Kong and then Taiwan, where her mother was born, and finally they settled in the US. Studying abroad in Shanghai thus both fulfilled the academic requirement for her in the language flagship program and conveniently afforded her the opportunity to meet her extended family members who remained in the city and its vicinity. The close connection between learning/speaking Mandarin and her Chinese-speaking mother also meant that Tiffany had to face sociolinguistic differences.

> 开始的时候我想改变怎么说，后来一个原因是太难，另一个原因是我喜欢有不同的口音
> […] 就是因为我讲话就像妈妈讲话。听起来也像妈妈。这是我的家人的关系。

> Translation: At the beginning I wanted to change how I spoke, but later one reason was it was too hard. Another reason was that I like having a different accent. […] It's just because I speak like Mom speaks. I sound like Mom. This is the relationship with my family. (Tiffany, post interview).

This perceived link between a non-standard, regional accent and an authentic Chinese identity is not uncommon among students who come from Chinese diaspora communities but do not appear "Chinese" physically (Diao, 2017). Speaking with a regional accent became a symbolic linguistic practice that authenticated Tiffany's Chinese identity, which was otherwise not transparent.

Tiffany's positioning as a Chinese person through connection with her mother was also evoked in her recordings with her Chinese roommate. In a conversation about their families, Wing (a student from Macau) described how her family escaped to Macau during China's wars in the 1940s. After Wing mentioned that her parents and grandparents still frequently discussed those wars, Tiffany immediately responded by mentioning her mother.

1	Wing:	%like through my grandfather and my parents their generation
2		they were like got like (inaudible)%
3	Tiffany:	%wow%
4	Wing:	%like until now like every time we just sit together like uh dinner
5		my grandfather and my father they are just willing like to talk about
6		[(inaudible)%]
7	Tiffany:	[uh-] %so interesting%
8	Wing:	%and they like to watch those like uh the world war two%
9	Tiffany:	uh 我妈最喜欢看[这个连续剧，南京的]
		Uh my mom's favorite TV show, about Nanjing
10	Wing:	[yea yea %like Japanese% yea yea] yea like%
11	Tiffany:	(laughing)

By switching to Mandarin here and evoking her mother's favorite Chinese TV show, Tiffany's response authenticated her Chinese identity and enacted a cultural discourse that reproduce artifacts (e.g., TV shows) and redistribute understandings (Kubota, 2016) of the Chinese history among ethnically Chinese people. Tiffany's interpretation of her multiracial identity as being Chinese therefore intersected with her gender identity and became a tool for her to make sense of the sexual harassment that she encountered in China.

Elisa: "I am an American with Chinese blood."

While in China, Elisa also encountered a strange man who touched her at a store. She discussed this experience with her Chinese roommate Ida in their recordings. While Ida praised Elisa for calling out

the offender publicly, two different discourses around sexual harassment also emerged in their discussion.

1 Elisa: 可是还很还还特别让我生气
    But still very still- still especially upsetting to me
2   因为根本就不应该有这样的情况(laughing)所以
    because such situations shouldn't have happened at all. (Laughing) so.
3 Ida: (laughing)我觉得因可能特别少但是，我觉得应该是特别少
    I think be- perhaps particularly rare but, I think it should be particularly rare.
4 Elisa: em
5 Ida: 就是但是因为前阶段可能有的女生遇到了然后她们就把这个消息发上去了
    Just but because previously maybe some girls encountered and then they just uploaded this information (online).
6 Elisa: oh
7 Ida: 这样会就引起特别多的人，[一个讨论]
    This would cause particularly many people (to have) a discussion.
8 Elisa: [对]
    Right.
9 Ida: 然后你，直到人一多讨就就是，更很多人参加讨论
    Then you, when as soon as there are a lot of people just- just, even more people participate in discussions.
10   我觉得他们可能就会说一些不是真实发生的事情
    I think they maybe would say some things that did not in fact take place.
11 Elisa: oh-
12 Ida: 对因为她们可能想引起关注
    Right because they maybe want to attract attention.
13 Elisa: em
14 Ida: 对
    Right.
15 Elisa: 对
    Right.
16 Ida: 所以我觉得
    So I think-
17 Elisa: 对，可是这样还好因为。
    Right. But this is still good because-
18   人特别是女人可以更好地像，准备好或者相不相信人
    People especially women can better like- be prepared or trust- not trust others.

Here, Ida hinted that sexual harassment should be "particularly rare" and therefore some stories that women tell are false. While Elisa appeared surprised, her initial responses were vague (lines 11 and 13). Although there is now an increasing critical awareness of sexual harassment within China, many challenges remain; the definition of what constitutes sexual harassment can still be unclear (Duan *et al.*, 2020). Women's stories of sexual harassment are often subject to speculation. Ida's claim that those stories are often falsified to seek attention is a manifestation of this discourse. Although Elisa positioned herself as a progressive woman (interview), and the conversation here began with her telling of her own sexual harassment experience, she did not explicitly disagree with Ida. Instead, she stated that even false alarms could still alert other women (lines 17–18).

Elisa's hesitation to disagree with Ida regarding sexual harassment in China is in line with her ambivalence towards her Chinese ethnicity and her relationship to the Chinese society. Unlike others

in her cohort, she was already familiar with Beijing. Her parents were both employees of a U.N. organization, and they relocated to China's capital city when she and her brother were children. According to Elisa, this decision was based on the experience of her mother, who as a Chinese American was schooled at a time when assimilation through English monolingualism was frequently prescribed to children of immigrants in the U.S.; Elisa's mother and grandmother thus chose to speak English only at home. Yet, Elisa's mother wished for her children to learn the language of her ethnolinguistic heritage. Elisa described that at the time she felt that her parents' decision to move to China was forced upon her, but as a young adult now she no longer felt it that way. After a few years in China, she and her family moved to Europe and eventually returned to the U.S., but both Elisa and her brother came back to Beijing to study abroad.

While returning to Beijing has allowed Elisa to improve her Mandarin and reconnect with her childhood memories, she did not view herself as Chinese. Elisa mentioned to me in informal conversations that she had become much more aware of the American racial politics and her own racial identity while attending her college in the U.S. – a progressive liberal arts school. When she explained her academic interests, she carefully used identity categories such as *huayi* ("of Chinese ethnicity" but living abroad) and *hunxue* ("mixed blood") to position her biracial self (interviews). But recognizing her own identity as a biracial woman in America also meant that she was not fully Chinese. While in China, she typically introduced herself as an American. Though once she received questions regarding her Mandarin proficiency, she would explain her multiracial hybrid background and her childhood years in Beijing:

> 要是有这样的情况，我会告诉他们哦我是美国人我的妈妈是美籍华人，然后我会跟他们解释然后在那个情况下他们会很，高兴因为我觉得他们很高兴遇到一个美国人可是有中国的血统然后，那样会觉得我的中文其实挺好的。然后要是人一看到我以为我是外国人，有时候会说，哦哇你的中文挺好。然后我也会跟他们解释，哦我是美国人，我的妈妈是美籍华人，我小时候住在这儿，然后他们也会挺高兴的。
>
> Translation: If there's such a situation I'd tell them oh I'm American my mom is Chinese American. Then I'll explain to them. Then in that situation they would be very- happy because I think they are happy to meet an American but with Chinese blood and then, like that they'd think my Chinese is actually very good. Then if human [*sic*] sees me and think I'm a foreigner, sometimes they'd say wow your Chinese is very good. Then I'd explain to them, oh I'm American my mom is Chinese American. I lived here when I was little. Then they would say very happily, wow, hm, your Chinese is very good. Right, so I think human [*sic*] hm, no matter which situation, their reception is very good.

Unlike Tiffany, who described herself as Chinese because of her mother, Elisa referred to herself here as an "American" whose mother is a "Chinese American," or "an American with Chinese blood." These terms positioned her as someone with Chinese heritage but also explicitly not a Chinese person. At the same time, her multiracial background as well as the childhood in Beijing also led to a sense of being both "familiar" and "distant" with the Chinese language, culture, and identity.

> 可是我看起来不是像中国人，中国人也一看我是像外国人，所以，我觉得在有的方面上我还是跟中国有很多的联系和关系可是，有的另一方面上也有很多的，distance。［…］因为现在我，不太熟悉像在中国像人与人的关系，或者像我的中文我觉得还是比较差了，当然不是流利的所以在语言方面上我不是像中国人，然后看起来像我也不是像中国人，所以，可能，在英文有个像 Asian American 像 Chinese American，可能我更跟这样的 identity labels，或者像 mixed Asian Americans.

> Translation: But I look not like Chinese. Chinese people also look at me resembling a foreigner. So, I think in some ways I still have many connections and relationship with China but, in some another way I also have many, distance. […] Because right now I- am not familiar with like the interpersonal relationships in China, or like my Chinese, I think it's relatively bad. Of course not fluent so in terms of language I am not like a Chinese person, and then I do not look like a Chinese person. So, maybe, in English something like *Asian American* like *Chinese American*. Maybe I am more [*sic*] with such *identity labels*, or like mixed Asian Americans.

In the quote above, Elisa described her racially ambiguous appearance, her linguistic inauthenticity, and her cultural distance from other Chinese people. She then switched to English to highlight her multiracial identity as a "mixed Asian American." Elisa's hesitation to disagree with Ida regarding the credibility of sexual harassment stories in China needs to be situated in this ambivalent sense toward her Chinese identity in general – while sometimes it may seem familiar, oftentimes she viewed it as distant.

Mae: "I am a multiracial Hong Konger."

Conversations between Mae and her Chinese roommate Kim also centered around issues related to gender and gender relationships. For example, in one recorded conversation Kim and Mae discussed patriarchy in gender roles in Chinese families. Mae described the West as offering an alternative, where stay-at-home fathers are becoming more socially acceptable.

1   Kim: 现在在中国观念基本上也是男生是一家之主
        Now in China the idea basically is also that men are the master of a family.
2   Mae: [对]
        Right.
3   Kim: [一]家之主
        Master of a family
4   Mae: 之主 uh hum.
        Master of. Uh hum.
5   Kim: 对
        Right.
6   Mae: 对，我觉得西方现在比较流行或者比较让社会可以接受的一一样事情
        Right. I think in the West now a relatively popular or socially acceptable- thing,
7   一个情况就是 um，就是妈妈出去工作然后，eh 父亲
         a situation, is um, just the mom going out to work and then, eh the father
8   Kim: 看[孩子]
        Look after kids.
9   Mae: [不会]工作就是留[在] 家里看孩子
        Will not work and just stay at home looking after kids.
10 Kim: [Oh]
11 Kim: Wow.

This conversation starts with the roommate Kim describing gender norms in Chinese families. Mae then proposed a "Western" practice in which the mother is the breadwinner and the father is the caretaker of the child. Her assertion of the "West" here is not only used to contrast the Chinese gender norms that her roommate just described; it also discursively positioned her as someone who had knowledge of and connection to Western gender norms.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Mae studied abroad in Beijing in the same program as Elisa. Mae's mother only spoke Cantonese and English at home, but Mae was sent to a private Mandarin-English bilingual K-12 school in Hong Kong. She then moved to the U.S. to attend a liberal arts college in a rural setting, where she identified herself as a Hong Konger and Asian:

因为我是在香港长大的所以其实我是一个挺，就是挺喜欢亚洲的人。嗯对我不太，了解美国的，文化。不是不了解可是只是不太适应。[…] 因为我长大的时候都是跟，就是很国际化的学生一起上学，所以会跟很多可能香港人还有很多混血儿一起做朋友，所以到美国的时候发现很多美国学生都没曾离开过美国，觉得和他们讨论一些问题会有点困难。

Translation: Because I grew up in Hong Kong so actually I am a very, just someone who likes Asia very much. Hm right I don't quite, understand American- culture. It's not that I don't understand but just I am not used to it. […] Because when I grew up I just with- just go to school with very internationalized students. So I make friends with many Hong Kongers and many mixed-blood children. So when I arrived in the US and discovered that many American students had never left America, I felt it could be a bit difficult to discuss with them some issues.

Mae described the U.S. as an unfamiliar place and her American cohorts as lacking international experience and thus being "difficult" for her to understand. As she referred to herself and her friends as 混血儿 ("mixed-blood child"), a Chinese term to mean multiracial people, she also equates her multiracial identity as being inherently globally minded. However, traits such as "internationalized" and "global" are not automatically attributed to a person just because they are multiracial. Mae emphasized herself being a "mixed-blood child" in Hong Kong in the quote, but what actually made her physically and socially multiracial in the Hong Kong context was her Whiteness (Kubota, 2016), which distinguished her from other locals and immigrants of color while growing up in Hong Kong. The Whiteness, combined with her socioeconomic privilege as a child of a transnationally mobile family (Diao, 2021), allowed her to present herself as cosmopolitan. Later in the interview, she continued to evoke her multiracial identity and her upbringing in Hong Kong to justify her investment in Mandarin learning, because Mandarin would create career opportunities and transnational mobility in "internationalized Asia." Mandarin was thus also disassociated from China and became linked to a globalized Asia.

Resisting being seen as "Chinese" is not uncommon among students from post-Handover Hong Kong (Jackson, 2006), but in Mae's case she further utilized her multiracial physique and presented herself as not Chinese. In Beijing she was placed into a class taught in Mandarin with local Chinese students, where she initially introduced herself simply as an American study abroad student in China.

我本来介绍自己的时候说我是美国，我是在美国上学我是美国的留学生，所以我觉得本来他们以为我是一个美国人，可是最后我也提醒他们其实我是香港人不是完全一个美国人[…]他们本来不太了解我的中文水平，所以可能跟我讲话的时候有点会问我就是你明白我说的话吗或者这种，然后最后他们就明白就是了解我的中文水平就不会再问这种问题。[…] 因为我看起来也不是完完全全是一个中国人的样子，对我告诉他们我从香港来的时候已经有点迟，对就是几个星期以前所以他们有点惊讶，可是我觉得他们我告诉他们的时候他们就更加明白我为什么会说中文。因为本来他们有点迷惑不知道为什么一个美国人会跟他们一起上课，就是为什么我的中文水平可以让我跟他们上课。

Translation: When I introduced myself I initially said I'm America- I go to school in America and I'm a study abroad student from America. So I think they originally thought that I was American, but eventually I also reminded them that I am a Hong Konger, not completely an American. […] They initially did not know my Chinese level, so when they spoke to me they would ask me, just, you know what I mean, or

> questions like that. Then finally they understood – they knew my Chinese level and would no longer ask questions of that kind. […] Because I don't look like a complete Chinese person. Right. When I told them that I came from Hong Kong, it was a bit late. Right. Just a few weeks ago. So they were surprised. But I think they- when I told them, they understood more why I could speak Chinese. Because originally they were a bit confused not knowing why an American would attend classes with them – simply why my Chinese level could allow me to go to class with them.

Despite previously expressing a sense of not belonging at her rural American college, here she presented herself simply as "an American student" to her Chinese peers. The inconsistent presentations of herself show how identity can be fluid and subject to (re)negotiation (Block, 2013), and for multiracial individuals the representation of identity is relational to the geographic and cultural location. However, the classmates were confused as to why she – an American with no visible Chinese heritage – was linguistically capable of taking a class fully taught in Mandarin. The very ideology that group people by racial appearance and allowed Mae to present herself as a White American also organized people's expectation of her Mandarin proficiency, and she eventually had to reveal that she was a multiracial "Hong Konger" who also spoke Mandarin.

Mae's responses to gender in her conversations with her Chinese roommate, thus, also show a clear intersection between her gender and her interpretation of her multiracial background. She was a cosmopolitan Hong Konger and American, who might have a knowledge of China's gender norms but was also unambiguously not affiliated with Chinese traditions.

Conclusion and Implications

Although gender – including sexual harassment – has been a recurring theme in the study abroad literature (Kinginger, 2009), the stories of the three multiracial women highlight how gender identity became a site of cultural differences and ethnoracial belongings for these multiracial women. These women were multiracial individuals who happened to be women, and they were also women who happened to be multiracial (Crenshaw, 1989). They had frequent discussions related to gender with their Chinese peers – sometimes because they had experienced sexual harassment, and other times because they had to cope with cultural traditions and gender norms that could shape their own lives and aspirations. In these discussions, they made sense of gender by making sense of their multiracial heritage and their relationship to a Chinese identity. Tiffany linked her own identity with her mother and frequently referred to herself as "Chinese," and thus the sexual harassment that she encountered was a part of dealing with men in a racially familiar context (Chinese) both within and outside of China. For Elisa, being multiracial meant that she is an American with Chinese heritage, and she also took an ambivalent position regarding stories of sexual harassment told in China. Mae, on the other hand, never once claimed to be "Chinese;" she viewed herself as a cosmopolitan, multiracial individual from Hong Kong, but she also presented herself as simply an "American" while in mainland China. Thus, intercultural learning is not simply learning to cope with "differences," but rather a transcultural process of rediscovering their links to multiple identity labels and redefine who they are in another cultural system of meaning making.

Another parallel across the three participants was how their multiracial identity also intersected with their learning and speaking of Mandarin. All three participants reported experiences that were similar to other Chinese heritage speakers (He, 2014); they did not arrive at learning Mandarin by choice. It was initially imposed by their parents. However, all of them also reported a growing desire to speak it as a tool to accomplish their academic and professional goals and claim a linguistic heritage. But different from monoracial Chinese heritage speakers (e.g., Du, 2018), they also all commented that

they could often pass as "foreigners," a racialized term in Chinese that is associated with Whites. Yet when they spoke, they experienced confusion from local Chinese people, because their advanced to superior Mandarin proficiencies challenged local linguistic expectations for someone who was not visibly Chinese.

Meanwhile, the varying identities that these focal women subscribed to and performed in discourse were also related to their upbringings in different contexts as well as their varying socioeconomic positions. While the focus here is how gender intersects with race, both aspects of identity also intersected with the languages they spoke and how well they spoke them, their personal and familial histories, socioeconomic class, transnational mobility, and so on. Intersectionality should continue to be a focus in the research of language and intercultural learning among study abroad students (Ortega, 2021). Educators working with study abroad students should also guide students toward an understanding of such complexities of identity and intersectionality. For instance, rather than prescribing intercultural communication as simply dealing with national differences, it may be better to introduce a reflective approach by analyzing the discursive production of cultural identity (Kubota, 2016) and highlight the intersectionality in transcultural experiences. Female-pressenting students may have a different language learning experience while studying abroad when compared with their male peers, and women from a racially minoritized background may yet encounter cultural negotiations differently.

As we write up the findings, we are also facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Intensified by the current public health crisis, sentiments of nationalism are growing in many places across the world today, including in the US. America is becoming more multiracial and multicultural, and with these findings that highlight such multiplicity and complexity, we urge future applied linguistics and intercultural learning research to depart from a nationalist/ic view by moving toward an explicit focus on the intersectionality of gender, race, and language learning.

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Author biodata

Wenhao Diao is an Associate Professor in the Department of East Asian Studies and the doctoral program of Second Language Acquisition and Teaching at the University of Arizona. She researches sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects of Chinese language teaching and learning in North America, with a particular interest in study abroad.

Yi Wang is a lecturer in the Department of Russian and East Asian Languages and Cultures at Emory University. Her research broadly concerns the social aspects of learning and use of Chinese as a

second language by transnational and multilingual students in the context of globalization and migration.

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[1] All person and place names are pseudonyms.

Appendix

Transcription Conventions for Recorded Conversations

,	short pause
.	long pause
?	raised intonation
[ ]	overlapping turns
-	prolonged utterances
[...]	omitted parts
(notes)	author's notes
%English%	words uttered in English originally