

Original Research

Claiming and displaying national identity: A case study of Chinese exchange students in Russia

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This study describes the emerging perceptions of national identity within the context of Covid-19 among nine Chinese exchange students in Russia. Qualitative data were mainly collected from interviews, complemented by WeChat group discussions, moment updates, comments and repatriation reports. Participants were exposed to cross-cultural contexts, their group membership (i.e. being a Chinese) triggered the reflection on national identity. Meanwhile, the Covid-19 pandemic influenced their thinking towards how they feel about China and others. Thematic findings related to the participants' awareness of national self, which manifested through their observations about the pandemic; politics, patriotism, lifestyle, education and diversity were discussed. This study reveals a strong emotional attachment to homeland among the less studied China-Russia exchange student cohort. Although China's success in combatting the Covid-19 heightened their sense of national pride, the participants were also found to critically reflect on their daily encounters and attempt to engage in social changes. The study showed the pervasiveness and expansion of identity work in the study abroad setting, suggesting greater attention to be paid to the opportunity for student self-discovery and rational thinking in the tertiary education.

KEYWORDS: national identity, Covid-19, Coronavirus, cross-cultural interaction, China-Russia exchange students, imagined community



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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Fong (2004), teenagers in Dalian were frustrated with financial prospects offered in China and believed that the wealthier western countries were superior for an expectation of wealth. Shuping Yang, a graduating senior from China, delivered a speech at her commencement

ceremony at the University of Maryland (UMD) in May 2017, in which Yang sincerely praised the 'sweet air' and 'freedom of speech' in America as compared to her experiences back home (Phillips, 2017). Chinese teenagers' identification with a global imagined community deemed China inferior and it would seem that Chinese youth lack a

strong national identity. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, China's efforts and contributions in epidemic prevention compared to other countries triggered an intense discussion by contemporary Chinese youth on the Internet. The Chinese people evoked strong emotions towards raising self-awareness and national pride with some obvious resentment towards other countries.

Contemporary Chinese youth has been categorised as the 'post-80s' (*balinghou*) and 'post-90s' (*jiulinghou*) which has become known as the 'wedge generation' for their unique stature between the old and the new China. They gradually helped to open the nation with their fresh and liberal views (Ash, 2016). Obviously, this can permanently change a country's image in the way it sees itself (Anholt, 2010). A positive national identity may be an antecedent of a positive international image. A significant question arises of how a generation sees their country and themselves during the backstop of a global pandemic. From the national level, emphasising loyalty to the 'nation' and constructing the personal political self-definition emerge as the dominant way to boost social solidarity (Rosenblatt, 1964). This research focuses on a particular subset of Chinese international students. Compared to their peers in the homeland, these cohorts developed stronger cross-cultural tolerance and empathy, as well as an increasing self-confidence and independence (Black & Duhon, 2006; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In late modernity, as Block (2007) pointed out, national identity is '*no longer seen as fixed at birth and tied to one's birthplace*' (Block, 2007, p. 866); conversely, it is fluid and dynamic, which can be negotiated and reconstructed through daily events to explain present-day phenomena (Billig, 1995; Puri, 2004; Smith, 2003, 2004).

Existing studies have demonstrated the positive impact of travelling abroad to study on students' national identity. For example, Wong (2009) investigated how international students who had left Hong Kong for at least 7 years and aged from 28-30 perceived their own national identity after

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returning to Hong Kong. Respondents reported that they looked at China in a more positive light and altered their perception from a somewhat pessimist view of being Chinese to a prouder cultural ambassador. A similar conclusion was arrived at by Gao (2011), who found a growing sense of nationalism among Chinese students who joined a yearlong study programme in the UK. In her study, the Chinese learners tended to affirm and often displayed their cultural affinity to their home country. Zhao (2019) also found that Chinese international students tended to promote China's national image in the US by sharing the positive attributes of China while avoiding the less positive images. Most of the research indicated that Chinese international students often found themselves increasing their nationalism even more while abroad.

Other researchers provided support for the variation of identity work related to foreign studies. Phases of the national identity development have been identified, i.e. from admiration to antagonism towards alien things, then reach conciliation between the national and global (Gu, 2010; Gao et al., 2016), some eventually stepped into global citizen identity (Hachtmann, 2012; Hendershot & Sperandio, 2009).

Zhang (2017) showed more complex and diverse forms of national identity among overseas students in New Zealand. There, Chinese students' national identity can be categorised in three ways as depicted by the three modes of kites: Honour-Based Kites indicating that students appeared to

identify with China; Criticism-Based Kites that illustrated a more rational and objective attitude toward China and Chinese-self; and Recluse-Based Kites showing preference to escape from the reality of China as they felt hopeless to change that reality. As Ward (2001) indicates, the development of identity in cross-cultural situations does not necessarily follow a linear or unidirectional course. There are also close relationships between demographic variables and acculturation in the cross-cultural communication process (Zheng et al., 2004). For example, changeability of identification reduces with age; length of residence is actually an indicator of the process of acculturation; cultural identification is related to the region of origin (mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong); significant differences of culture identity are found across a student status (undergraduate, postgraduate and visiting scholars).

The national identity is an important part of how study abroad students think of themselves and link to psychological adjustment and well-being (Savicki & Cooley, 2011). Hence, diverse research subjects need more attention. Such as short-term Chinese exchange students and those in the less popular destination countries. Previous research mainly focused on overseas Chinese students in popular countries (Gao, 2011; Wong, 2009; Zhao, 2019; Barriball & While, 1994) and lacked enough research on other less popular countries. The 2019 White Paper on China's Overseas Students published by New Oriental Education & Technology Group detailed responses from 6,228 students and parents showing that the US, the UK and Australia have become the main destination countries for Chinese students (Wei, 2019). Naturally, more attention has been paid to popular English-speaking countries and less research on less popular countries, such as Russia. Russia differs greatly from English-speaking countries in language, history, culture, national characteristics and customs, etc. So, a question arises: how do Chinese students deal with their national identity issues in Russia? A research into Chinese students in Russia might provide a different perspective on national identity research.

In terms of the research methods, previous research on national identity mainly relies on a semi-structured interview (Dolby, 2001; Gao, 2011; Wong, 2009; Zhao, 2019) for its advantages in focusing on the specific experience and perceptions of individuals engaged in real life (Barriball & While, 1994). People express deep personal feelings and opinions documenting mundane details of daily life on social media (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). It is constructive for researchers to update and diversify the method of data collection.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

For a better understanding of a Chinese student's national identity, it is necessary to presuppose an answer to a more fundamental question. What is identity? An 'identity' is shorthand for ways of talking about the self and the community (Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994). Stable identity, such as national identity, develops through a process of experimentation, reflection, and observation. When students are exposed to a foreign culture, a crucial question relating to national identity is how the national 'we' (in this case, we the Chinese) is constructed (Savicki & Cooley, 2011).

This study is concerned with the national identity of study abroad Chinese students and the possible utility of Social Identity Theory (SIT) heuristic frameworks for the investigation of developmental processes. Meanwhile, the data is actually much more complex than might have been anticipated from the perspectives of SIT. In brief, SIT (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) is based upon the observation that individuals belong to many different social groups (e.g. gender, national, ethnic, occupational, social class, etc.). SIT postulates that in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice derives largely from favourable comparisons (Bennett et al., 1998). In a country context, the home country is typically considered the focal in-group, whereas foreign countries represent the out-groups (Shankarmahesh, 2006; Verlegh, 2007).

Because Chinese exchange students have a diverse range of national attachment, it is necessary to explain briefly the concepts of nationalism, patriotism, and national identity by drawing on SIT

and related psychological research. National identity refers to *'the importance of national affiliation as well as the subjective significance of an inner bond with the nation'* (Blank & Schmidt, 2003, p. 296). It is the citizen's subjective recognition of belonging to a nation, as well as the feeling of national pride (Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

Patriotism implies not only a sense of national belonging but also a specific set of beliefs and meaning attached to the nation (Huddy, 2013). Patriotism is a deeply affective attachment to the nation (Conover & Feldman, 1987, p. 1) or the *'degree of love for and pride in one's nation'* (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989, p. 271) in a more positive side of national attachments. Nationalism goes beyond a simple sense of national superiority to include uncritical conformity and blind adherence to national values (Schatz et al., 1999).

In China, national identity is also closely linked to education. Since 1991, the Chinese State Education Commission has advocated a new sense of belonging to the nation in terms of an emotional link with the homeland. A revised school curriculum now includes territory, language, and cul-

ture among Chinese students from which three perspectives were constructed: the five thousand years of ancient civilisation, the recent one hundred years of anti-imperialist resistance, and the present great power status (Suresh, 2002).

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and China's success in reigning in the virus, this study will look at the study abroad students' national identity during a worldwide health emergency and any influences occurring to affect the students' way of thinking about their country.

This study will try to answer two questions. (1) Does the experience of studying in Russia change a Chinese student's national identity? (2) Has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced Chinese students' thinking towards how they feel about their country as it relates to China's success in combatting the virus?

3.1. Participants

Nine Chinese undergraduate students who studied abroad in Russia during the 2019 spring semester agreed to join in this study. Most of them have no prior overseas experience (Table 1).

Table 1
Participants' information

PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	MAJOR	OVERSEAS EXPERIENCE
Josh	22	Male	Business English	Australia, Russia, Thailand
Angie	22	Female	Business English	Thailand, Russia
Mark	21	Male	English	Russia
Heather	22	Female	Business English	Russia
Ana	21	Female	Business English	Russia
Katie	21	Female	English	Russia
Julie	22	Female	English	Russia
Robyn	22	Male	English	Russia
Hannah	23	Female	English	Russia

3.2. Data collection

Data was collected from 24 February, 2020 to 25 April, 2020, when students were under self-quarantine. Online video interviews were first conducted via WeChat instant messaging tool,

supplemented by participants' group chat, WeChat moment updates, comments and repatriation reports, as they offer a well-rounded understanding of their real-time thoughts during their study abroad (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2
WeChat group information

PARTICIPANTS	DATE	TOPIC
Hannah, Josh, Ana, Robyn	27 Feb, 2020	Comparison of COVID-19 solutions offered in China and other countries
Ana, Mark, Katie	24 Apr, 2020	
Hannah, Julie, Mark, Robyn	7 Feb, 2020	Unforgettable experience in Russia

Table 3
Interview information

NAME	LOCATION	DATE	DURATION	MODE OF COMMUNICATION
Josh	W City	24 Feb, 2020	32 min	Video telephone
Angie	H City	25 Feb, 2020	22 min	Video telephone
Mark	X City	24 Feb, 2020	34 min	Video telephone
Heather	W City	24 Feb, 2020	43 min	Video telephone
Ana	W City	27 Feb, 2020	34 min	Video telephone
Katie	W City	25 Feb, 2020	30 min	Video telephone
Julie	W City	24 Feb, 2020	24 min	Video telephone
Robyn	E City	26 Feb, 2020	37 min	Video telephone
Hannah	H City	27 Feb, 2020	41 min	Video telephone

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, later transcribed and translated into English and processed by Nvivo 12. In this research, based on the complicated and emotional attachment toward 'we' and 'others', a crucial question relating to national identity is how the national 'we' is constructed. The discussion falls into four themes.

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

4.1. Sense of belonging

Upon returning to China, the students demonstrated a clear indication of a sense of belonging and an emotional attachment about feeling 'at home'. This illustrates the development of self-consciousness as a Chinese citizen both 'here' and 'there'. The data suggests that the students believed they had a stronger sense of belonging toward China when they were in Russia. They stressed the importance of emotional identification with China for the subjective discursive construction of na-

tional identity in the individual interviews.

Excerpt 1. *When I was in China, I took it for granted that I was Chinese, and I did not have such a strong emotion about being Chinese. In Russia, the identity of Chinese was of great significance to me. No matter where I am, I am always Chinese* (当在中国时, 我就理所当然的认为我时中国人, 也没有特别强烈的情感, 去了俄罗斯之后, 才发觉中国人这个身份对我特别重要. 今后无论我在哪, 我首先的是个中国人) (Angie, Interview, 26 Feb, 2020).

In group chat, when one participant recalled an unpleasant experience abroad, she expressed a similar idea.

Excerpt 2. *When I was in Russia, the locals were very friendly and the teachers and classmates got along very well. However, I do not belong here and it is not my home. In fact, I do not have a sense of belonging* (虽然在俄罗斯那段期间, 当地的老师, 朋友对我很友善, 但是我总觉得自己不属于这里, 不是我的家, 总没有归属感) (Mark, WeChat Group, 24 Feb, 2020).

For these students, gaining a sense of identity and belonging is vitally important. During the interviews, the students often used the phrase 'at home'. Most of the respondents gave 'home' a variety of meanings ranging from the parental home to a regional framework of reference to the state as a whole. These students retained a strong sense of loyalty to China based not on the idea of an imagined community, but on the idea of an imagined family, which illustrated that they regarded China as their conceptual 'home' (Fong, 2004). This sense of home was more prominent on repatriation. In Russia, their minority status as a Chinese within the dominant host culture decides that they needed to heighten awareness of their own group membership to seek a sense of belonging. Therefore, the narratives of their identities emphasised being Chinese (Probyn, 1996).

4.2. National pride

National pride is a high-frequency key word in interviews. When our questions turned to what determined their sense of national pride, the students listed economic achievements, social progress, and culture achievements.

Excerpt 3. *After living abroad, I miss China's infrastructure and developed transportation. China is really better than foreign countries in many aspects, such as Alipay, Taobao, and high-speed rail* (在国外的時候, 就特別想念國內的生活, 完善的基础設施, 便捷的交通。中國的確在一些地方比國外做的好, 比如支付寶, 淘寶和高铁) (Mark, Interview, 24 Feb, 2020).

We also looked at the students' WeChat moments which further illuminated the pride they have in China when comparing some things to Russia.

Excerpt 4. *While studying Russian history, I learned that Russian history is less than a thousand years old. Compared with China, I am particularly proud of my motherland's history* (在学习俄罗斯历史時, 我了解到俄罗斯的历史才不到一千年。与中国五千年历史文化相比, 我为祖国的历史感到特别自豪) (Katie, Comment on WeChat Moments, 15 Apr, 2019).

Some students boastfully compare their 'five thousand years' of history with Russian 'a thousand years'. Some seemed to attach great import-

ance to their native culture and claimed its outright superiority over the other country. Consciously or unconsciously, they were comparing their experiences in Russia and China. These comparisons made them realise the advantages of China, which they rarely noticed at home, which contributed to a more positive view of China. SIT postulates that in-group favouritism is a consequence of subjective identification. The attitude toward their own nation will change in a comparative context, with different dimensions being selected depending on the comparison of out-groups that are available in the prevailing context (Bennett et al., 1998).

4.3. National superiority

A feeling of national superiority (Hechter, 1987; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989) is a vital characteristic of nationalism. As Covid-19 spread all over the world, China's epidemic was under control while the situation in foreign countries, such as the US, was getting worse. The participants discussed China's situation in a group chat.

Excerpt 5. *Other countries should learn from China's governance methods. After all, this time China handled it best. Strongly urge other countries to imitate China's attitudes and practices. If those countries remain blindly confident for a long time, this will lead to self-destruction* (其他国家应该借鉴中国的治理方法。毕竟, 只有这次中国才能做到最好。强烈呼吁其他国家模仿中国的态度和做法, 如果那些国家已久盲目自信, 那就自身自灭吧) (Josh, WeChat Group, 27 Feb, 2020).

Excerpt 6. *The American system is inferior to China. No country in the world is comparable to China. Those countries talk about human rights every day. In this case, only China can control it* (美国的制度确实不如中国。世界上没有哪个国家能与中国媲美。这些国家每天都在谈论人权。在这种情况下, 只有中国可以控制它)。

When it comes to the latest international news about other governments' measures, most students expressed national superiority with statements such as 'we are the best' and 'other countries should take action like ours as soon as possible'. In the light of the origin of Covid-19 and the in-

sulting term, the 'China virus', the following statement is widely and actively supported among the students.

Excerpt 7. *In the past two days, there were rumours that the new type of the Coronavirus did not come from China at all. You see, the American flu was earlier. They did not check it out, and then it spread to China. When we checked it out, we are the convenient whipping boy* (这两天有传闻说新型冠状病毒根本不是来自中国, 你看, 美国流感比我们早, 但是他们没有检查出来, 然后传到中国, 被我们检查出来了, 我们中国就得背锅) (Robyn, Comment on WeChat Moments, 27 Feb, 2020).

To the extent that larger, nearer and more powerful outgroups are more threatening, ethnocentric, and nationalistic hostility is more strongly directed against larger, nearer, and more powerful outgroups (Sumner, 1906, p. 12). This statement indicates that they harbour antipathy toward outgroups, such as the US, the potential powerful imagined enemy.

SIT provides initial reasons to some of the principal ideas that characterise national identity, such as sense of belonging, national pride and superiority. In this study, the data is actually much more complex than might have been anticipated from the perspectives of SIT which results in in-group favouritism or out-group denigration or both. The following part will focus on a related theory by drawing on related research to make sense of students' national identity.

4.4. Critical reflection

The acknowledged advantages of China did not blindfold the participants, as most students also noticed the strengths that Russia had in some areas.

Excerpt 8. *After living in Russia, the Russian awareness of the pursuit of art and beauty is worthy of our study. I lived in a remote city, where the architecture was very distinctive. However, I get aesthetic fatigue by looking at the seamless sameness of the buildings in China. While pursuing high-speed economic development, often there is a price to pay* (在俄罗斯生活了一段时间之后, 俄国人对艺术和美的追求值得我们学习。我住在一个偏远的城市, 那里的建

'Social Identity Theory (SIT) postulates that in-group favouritism is a consequence of subjective identification. The attitude toward their own nation will change in a comparative context, with different dimensions being selected depending on the comparison of out-groups that are available in the prevailing context'

筑非常有特色。但是, 我已经对中国千篇一律的建筑审美疲劳了。不过也能理解在追求高速经济发展的同时, 往往要付出一定的代价) (Julie, Interview, 24 Feb, 2020).

Excerpt 9. *Russia is a well-educated nation. When the hall is full of people, everyone queues in an orderly manner without making noise. In the four months of my life, I find even if there was a traffic jam, I have never heard the driver's irritating horn. At the same time, in the street, the car must be a courtesy to pedestrians, and pedestrians will not randomly cross the road. At this point, it is worth learning* (俄罗斯民族的公民素养。大厅里挤满了人, 大家都有序的排队, 没有吵闹。生活的四个月里, 即使堵车, 我也未曾听到司机烦躁的鸣笛声, 同时, 在街上, 汽车一定是先礼让行人, 同时行人不会随意乱闯马路。在这一点上, 值得我们学习) (Hannah, Personal Report, 4 July, 2019).

Teacher-student relationships and social manners were also appreciated by the participants.

Excerpt 10. *After studying in Russia for a while, I can intuitively feel the difference between the Chinese and Russian education models. In China, the system promotes the 'duck-feeding' teaching that has teachers dominating the lessons and has students as notetakers. In Russia, the class atmosphere is relatively active and relaxed, and the interaction between students and teachers is more frequent. Although I prefer the Russian way, I know China has a large population and lacks educational resources. Therefore, it is unrealistic for China to adopt an education method like Russia. What is more, with the reform of the education system, China will solve the education soon* (在俄罗斯学习了一段时间之后, 我可以直观地感受到中俄教育模式之间的差异。在中国, 老师在教室里占主导地位, 而学生只做笔记。

'Exposure to intercultural interactions, diversity-related courses and observations of the host country offered Chinese students an opportunity to (re)examine their national identity'

在俄罗斯，课堂气氛相对活跃和轻松，师生之间的互动更加频繁。尽管我更喜欢俄罗斯的方式，但我知道中国的国情不允许，中国人口众多，缺乏教育资源。中国采取像俄罗斯这样的教育方法是不现实的。而且，随着教育体制的改革，教育问题肯定会很快得到解决) (Josh, Interview, 24 Feb, 2020).

Exposure to intercultural interactions, diversity-related courses and observations of the host country offered Chinese students an opportunity to (re)examine their national identity. Compared to Russia, they admitted that China's shortcomings were obvious and inevitable. They are willing to learn from Russia. They developed a scale of constructive patriotism defined as 'an attachment to country characterised by critical loyalty' and 'questioning and criticism' driven by 'a desire for positive change' (Schatz et al., 1999, p. 153).

In the Covid-19 situation, a wave of anger and grief flooded Chinese social media site Weibo (weblog) when news of Dr Li's death broke late on the 7th of February (Yu, 2020). Intense discussions were raised among the students.

Excerpt 11. *The hot search about the death of Dr Li Wenliang, from the continuous surge to the disappearance of all, ridiculous freedom of speech. We want freedom of speech* (关于李文亮医生之死的热搜，从持续暴涨到全部消失，可笑的言论自由。我们想要言论自由) (Julie, WeChat Group, 7 Feb, 2020).

Excerpt 12. *Behind every social platform, there is a pair of watching eyes and any sensitive words must be deleted* (在每个社交平台的背后，都有一对眼睛可以直接看，所有相关的单词和单词都必须删除) (Mark, Comment on WeChat Moments, 7 Feb, 2020).

According to the respondents' reaction, they blend a love of country with political efforts directed at a change in the status quo. To our relief, on March 5, 2020, Dr Li was accorded martyr status for sacrificing his life in combating Covid-19 by the National Health Commission, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and the

State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine (China identifies 14 Hubei frontline workers, 2020). To some extent, the youth's patriotism can lead to a positive civic consequence and active political involvement (Rothi et al., 2005). On the other hand, their demonstrated reflexivity proved the link between political involvement and constructive patriotism (Schatz et al., 1999, p. 153).

5. DISCUSSION

Turning now to the two research questions mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

(1) Does the experience of studying in Russia change a Chinese student's national identity? National identity is often invisible in the homeland where nationality is seen as the norm. Once uprooted from a comfort zone and becoming the 'other', 'being Chinese' is invigorated and salient. Hence, when study participants were placed into cross-cultural contexts, their group membership (i.e. being a Chinese) triggered the reflection on national identity. The participants demonstrated a clear sense of national pride when China outweighed Russia in some respects. Inglehart (1997), in his 'scarcity hypothesis', held that in a country where economic and material resources are relatively scarce, individuals pursue the goals of economic development, material abundance and tend to have a strong national identity. Such observation is applicable to people in China, who are keen on nationalism and patriotism. Studying in Russia as an advanced industrial country, research participants enhanced their subjective values of national identity by comparing the levels of socio-economic development in homeland and abroad. Meanwhile, they also acknowledged the strength of the host country and were willing to learn from Russia in critical reflection.

(2) Has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced their thinking towards how they feel about their country as it relates to China's success in combatting the virus? The respondents expressed a sense of superiority about China's rapid response to contain the outbreak, while other governments floundered. The favourable comparison largely consolidates national identity, which in return, would enhance

the solidarity and cohesion in a national group (Richards, 2013) and eventually help the country out of the crisis. However, the out-group prejudice on the international issue incites discrimination and xenophobia. In the longer term, stigmatisation and discrimination might have a negative impact on Chinese youth's interaction with the diverse world where different ideas and cultural norms exist. The participants' attitude of anti-discrimination in the world-wide context and their appeal for the 'freedom of speech' expressed their desire for a positive social change, which implies their noticeable growth from passive audiences to future proactive social engagers.

6. CONCLUSION

Previous research on interculturality also shows convincingly that contact with other cultures alone is not sufficient to dispel stereotypes; stereotyping tends to impede deeper learning and cross-cultural development, and even encourage hostility (Ye & Edwards, 2018; Kinginger, 2008; Tusting et al., 2002). Hence conscious reflection and re-entry guidance are particularly important for overseas returnees, when in-depth contact with host residents is absent (Ye, 2017). At the individual level, a student's national identity affects intercultural communication. Negative attitudes toward some or all outgroups and boasting itself superior may be potential barriers to effective intercultural interactions (Thomas, 1996). Therefore, Chinese international students' concrete expression on national

identity could offer valuable analysis and recommendations for the suitable design of interventions and future training programmes. Given the positive effects of national identity, Chinese educators could encourage international programmes aimed at maintaining a sense of national identity in cross-cultural interaction.

However, this study is limited by the comparatively small sample data size and less diverse demographic backgrounds. The findings can hardly be generalised, but this did not hinder this research to shed light on other similar settings and provide empirical evidence for tertiary educators and exchange programme organisers. Therefore, further research may wish to use large-scale sample sizes and choose different regions and various educational backgrounds of the participants. Additionally, an investigation of exchange students' own perceptions of their national identity before and after studying abroad is particularly recommended.

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Appendix

Interview questions

(1) What was it like to be a Chinese when you were in Russia?

当在俄罗斯的时候，你是如何看待中国人这个身份？

(2) What is the difference you observe between China and Russia?

你观察到中国和俄罗斯有何不同？

(3) While you were in Russia, how did you describe yourself to people you met?

你在俄罗斯的时候，你是如何向他人描述自己的？

(4) Do you look at China differently while or since leaving Russia?

在俄罗斯时或离开俄罗斯时，你是否看待中国有和不同？

(5) What is your most unforgettable moment in Russia?

在俄罗斯时，你最难忘的时刻是什么？

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