Ethnicity, temporality and educational mobilities: Comparing the ethnic identity constructions of Mongolian and Tibetan students in China

This paper explores the impact of educational mobilities on the ethnic identity construction of minority students in China. Adopting 'temporality' as an analytical tool, this paper highlights the dynamic temporal multiplicity in ethnic identity construction by comparing longitudinal in-depth interviews of a Mongolian and a Tibetan student. This multiplicity of temporality is manifested in three aspects: temporality of ethnic othering, temporality of ethnic identity awakening, and temporality of 'worldly time' and 'ethnic time. The 'worldly time' and the 'ethnic time' entail distinctive understandings about these students' pace and priorities in life. Both students defer their 'permanent' ethnic identity to an imagined future. Yet, adopting the gaze of the dominant others, both students subconsciously constructed an essentialist view of their ethnic cultures as fixed and stable and those of the dominant cultures as alive and fluid. This paper enriches our understanding of the politics of subjectivation through the lens of 'temporality'.

Keywords: mobility, ethnicity, temporality, Tibetan, Mongolian, China

Introduction

Although literature on the relations between ethnic minorities and educational migration in China has mostly focused on pre-university stages (Bilik 1998; Bulag 2003; Grose 2015; Postiglione 2008; Yuan, Qian & Zhu 2017), a nascent body of research has begun to explore the impact of educational mobilities (i.e. educationally motivated geographic movements of students from their home region to another) at higher education stages. Studies on dislocated

Tibetan[1] college students have revealed the relationship between their ethnic identity construction and academic outcomes (Kayongo-Male and Lee 2004), strategies in ensuring the continuity of a sense of self-worth (Yi and Wang 2012), complexities and dilemmas in cultural citizenship negotiation (Yang 2017a; Yi 2014), and patterns of ethnic identity construction influenced by educational tracks (Yang 2017b). Uyghur college students with similarly dislocated schooling experiences are observed to have developed situated identities, placing more emphasis on their elite identity when compared with other Uyghur members and on their positive cultural heritage when in the company of Han students (Guo and Gu 2016).

However, almost all of the abovementioned studies have focused exclusively on one specific ethnic group and lack comparative perspectives. Moreover, insufficient attention has been paid to the temporal perspective of ethnic identity construction, which, as Yi and Wang's (2012) study inadvertently indicates, can be critical for disentangling the complex strategies that their Tibetan informants adopted to ensure a sense of continuity in ethnic and self-identity development. In this paper, we see time not simply as linear and progressive, but as being a dynamic multiplicity (Lingard and Thompson 2017) and can be lived at different paces and in different dimensions. Following this theoretical perspective on temporality, this paper attempts to experiment by using temporality as an analytical tool to examine the impact of educational mobilities on individual minority students from two different ethnic groups, Mongolian and Tibetan, in relation to their ethnic identity exploration. Recognising the multiplicity, multi-paced and multi-dimensional understanding of time, our paper seeks to explore two research questions: (1) In what ways do minority ethnic students construct their ethnic identities in their educational mobilities? (2) In what ways do their experiences inform 'multiple temporalities' especially regarding their ethnic identity construction?

Educational mobility landscape in ethnic China

The population of China's 55 officially-recognised ethnic minority groups has reached 113.79 million, accounting for 8.49% of China's entire population and occupying more than 64% of its territory (Census Office 2012). Most ethnic minorities inhabit China's borderland areas and are traditionally considered to inherit distinctive languages and religions that differ from the Han Chinese majority (Kayongo-Male and Lee 2004). There has been widely-documented unequal economic development between ethnic minority-concentrated regions and Han-dominated ones. Wang (2003) suggests that more than 80% of the 'poor population' who lacked food and clothing were from minority areas. At present, ethnic minorities' 'economic situation remains disadvantageous due to poverty and harsh local conditions' (Li and Heath 2017, 2). To tackle such uneven distributions of social wealth, the Chinese government has put in place various educational policies. For instance, since 1985, inland Tibet classes (*neidi xizang ban)* have been established for Tibetan students to receive secondary education in economically more developed cities (Wang and Zhou 2003; Yang 2017b). Since 2000, similar inland Xinjiang classes have been established for Uyghur students (Grose 2015). In higher education, fifteen minzu universities/institutes have been established for ethnic minority students (Yang 2017b). Additionally, preferential admissions have been offered at different levels, depending on regional policies (Sautman 1998). Over the past two decades, the Chinese government also began to allow students from mainland China to cross borders to pursue higher education in special administrative regions including Hong Kong (Xu 2015b), where ethnic relations are mainly framed around Chinese versus non-Chinese speaking groups. Meanwhile, public understanding of ethnic minority groups identified in mainland China remains minimal in such regions (Xu 2017). Some of these border-crossing students are ethnic minority students with outstanding academic results. Together, these create a complex landscape of educational mobility for ethnic minority students at the higher education level.

Such educational mobility for ethnic minorities, as Yang (2014, 11) argues, can become 'a primary and powerful […] hierarchy-establishing technology', because it 'acts as a […] compelling way to structure the political consciousness and subconsciousness' of ethnic minority students who seem to buy into a hegemonic hierarchical view that reduces their own places of origin/ethnicity to a low socio-political status in the national picture. Educational mobility therefore can engender complicated outcomes for the ethnic cultural acquisition of minority students. Commenting on the dislocated Tibetan students in pre-university *neidi* schools, Wang and Zhou (2003, 103) argue that 'Even the elite group of minority students would undermine the rhetoric or ideal of "national equalities" because of the deprivation of ethnic identities and cultures through the dislocated schooling'. More recent studies on Tibetan students in higher education by Yi and Wang (2012) and Yang (2017b) demonstrate how dislocated schooling has alienated Tibetan students from their own ethnic cultures and thus activated reflective awareness of ethnicity. Both studies point to a lack of space for ethnic exploration within the existing curriculum and subject choice in non-Minzu universities. Regarding Uyghur students, Guo and Gu (2016) similarly find limited space for these students to articulate their ethnic identity in positive ways. In terms of ethnic Mongolian students, Bulag's (2003) self-account is fraught with struggles that his extended family experienced owing to the economic and social impact of learning the Mongolian language. All these studies have pointed to the identity struggles of ethnic minorities by focusing on a single ethnic group. In this paper, we further engage with this fundamental identity issue of ethnic minorities within educational mobilities at the higher education stage by drawing on the experiences of a Tibetan and a Mongolian student.

Time, ethnicity, and educational mobilities

The article engages in dialogue with theoretical understanding of time derived from theorists such as E. P. Thompson (1967), Urry (1994), Hansen (2015) and Lingard and Thompson (2017). The traditional conception of time is under the modernist or industrial framework that limits itself to 'clock time' (Lingard and Thompson 2017). Clock time, as E. P. Thompson (1967, 61) cogently puts forward in his seminal work, has internalised the normalisation of conduct according to the time template. A morality of time has been instilled through the constant functioning of clock time, in which time is considered currency: 'it is not passed but spent'. This line of thought is foundational to Urry's (1994, 133) interpretation of clock time:

> that time is money so that one should be careful with the passage of time; that a modern person is aware of and oriented to the passing of time; that time is a resource which is to be organised, regulated and distributed.

Considering the conceptualisation of time 'as a linear and objective process that exists outside the experience of the individual within time' to be problematic, Lingard and Thompson (2017, 1) propose a theoretical turn in conceptualising time associated with postmodernism. They argue that 'time is lived, and this lived time flows in multiple directions, such that the past and the future are always available in the present' (p 6). Hence, '[d]oing time in the Sociology of Education' 'necessarily requires giving time to time, not at the expense of the spatial but as the equal partner' (p 3). Although Lingard and Thompson have not provided an explicit definition of their conception of time, three key features could be discerned. First, time is socially constructed and experienced. Second, time is both dynamic and multiple. Third, time is not only about clock time or social time, but also about spacetime. This new notion of time, therefore, points to the 'multiple temporalities' and 'temporality of subjectification' in the temporal processes of individuals' experience.

Temporal experiences, Hansen (2015) argues, are most closely linked to the life

spaces that social agents inhabit. The living environs can have a profound impact on the social agents' temporal experiences. Different social and cultural contexts can impose disparate types of temporal definitions, conceptions and practices. We also echo Lingard and Thompson (2017) by maintaining that time is a dynamic multiplicity because it is lived and non-passive. Therefore, time can be fast-paced and in shortage, i.e. 'time poverty' (Thompson and Cook 2017, 27), when there is more stress and when the social agents are more 'purposeful'. Time can also be slow when one experiences boredom, or encounters 'not-yet-purposeful' situations (Hansen 2015, 50), such as 'time for pure delight' as one participant in our study described. More intriguingly, the same social agent may simultaneously experience two sets of time schemes, just like Thompson and Cook's (2017, 32) teacher participants who are found to construct a set of 'dual, but competing, rhythms', governed by 'a disciplinary temporality…and…a control temporality' which are 'doubled but not synchronised'. In this way, temporality as an analytical tool provides 'a vocabulary of temporal distinctions…proposes ways of bridging poor and rich in terms of temporal processes, and…suggests culturally acceptable narrative structures for framing… individual purposes' (Hansen 2015, 55).

Methods

The data are drawn from two different research projects conducted separately by Cora (2013-2018) and Miaoyan (2011-2018). In 2013, Guoxiang (a pseudonym) participated in a longitudinal project in which Cora explored the identity construction of 31 mainland Chinese students who crossed the border to study at a Hong Kong university. Guoxiang first revealed her ethnic identity to Cora in 2014 during her exchange semester in the UK. Intrigued by Guoxiang's ethnic experiences, Cora followed this topic up by asking questions pertaining to her migration experiences and ethnic identity constructions. Between 2014 and 2018,

Guoxiang was interviewed four times, and had some 50 email exchanges with Cora. Guoxiang's accounts were further enriched by around 200 entries in her online blogs, and 300 entries in her Weibo[2] updates, which were published between 2011 and 2015.

Dolkar (a pseudonym) was a key informant in Miaoyan's research project entitled 'University as a site of ethnic identity construction,' which started in March 2011. Over the past seven years, Miaoyan has interviewed 40 Tibetan students who were graduates of the inland Tibet classes. All informants were asked questions about their educational experiences and their ethnic identities to understand how their migration and schooling experiences in inland cities influenced their perceptions of Tibet/inland, Tibetan/Han, and ethnic/national identities. Miaoyan has known Dolkar since 2014. Dolkar studied at a university in the same city where Miaoyan works. Over the past four years, Miaoyan has met Dolkar on more than 50 occasions. Apart from formal interviews, Dolkar dined at Miaoyan's place five times, when she shared her personal stories and recent encounters. Miaoyan also attended some of the student activities that Dolkar joined at university. Table 1 details both students' educational trajectories.

(Insert Table 1)

While their distinctive trajectories point to nuanced differences in relation to their cosmopolitan-ethnic identities, as we will highlight later, in this paper we choose to focus mainly on their comparable ethnic experiences and construction of ethnicity in relation to temporality. It should be noted that we make no claim to generalise the findings. Instead, we hope that this juxtaposition can stimulate further debate and scholarly attention in this under-researched area.

Temporality of ethnic othering

Both Guoxiang and Dolkar have reflected on the 'before' and 'after' understandings of their

ethnic consciousness (Kayongo-Male and Lee 2004, 289). Guoxiang recalled:

> Back in Inner Mongolia, my ethnicity was nothing special, really. We don't speak the Mongolian language or live in Mongolian tents. We are all *normal* people. However, once we stepped outside of Inner Mongolia, I started to look at my ethnicity from a new perspective, and realised that this is actually a cultural label on me…this was when I began to ponder my ethnicity (our emphasis).

Guoxiang's experiences evoke Gladney's (1998) 'relational identity' thesis, which underlines that ethnicity becomes a salient category when interactions with members of other ethnic groups increase. Dolkar's recollection was even more dramatic:

> When in primary school, I thought the Han people were the ethnic minority. It was not until Primary 6 that I realised that, 'Oh, actually I am a member of an ethnic minority group'.

This revelation presented itself to Dolkar as she was contemplating attending an inland Tibet class in a Han-dominated region. For Dolkar this reversal of identification, from her naive understanding of being in the majority to the realisation of being an ethnic minority, was imbued with her uncomfortable new understanding of power dynamics within the national ethnic hierarchy (Yi and Wang 2012).

Guoxiang's emphasis on Mongolians being 'normal people' reveals the persistent ethnic stereotypes to which she had become accustomed. When she arrived in Beijing, as soon as people learned that she was from Inner Mongolia, they would ask her if she lived in Mongolian tents, could ride a horse or play archery (Xu 2017). Feeling annoyed, she came to realise that her Han peers had little understanding of her ethnicity. This was exacerbated by the relative lack of economic development and marginalisation in her home region (Bilik 1998), engendering the impression that her ethnic group was 'uncultivated' (*bukaihua*). Dolkar observed similar stereotypes:

I felt that inlanders severely lacked understanding of us (Tibetans). They asked us so many strange questions in daily life: 'Do you live in a tent? Do you eat rice? Are you from a tribe?' All these questions make me realise how backward (*luohou*) and primitive (*yuanshi*) our ethnic group is in their eyes. They seem indifferent to our history and culture, poetry and arts or religious beliefs.

Such stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination towards ethnic minority groups have been amply documented in existing studies (Yang 2017a, 2017b; Guo and Gu 2016). Yang (2017b) and Yi and Wang (2012, 70), for instance, note that Han students attributed ill-informed stereotypes to Tibetan students by portraying them as 'pre-modern', 'backward' and 'barbaric'.

Paradoxically, since both students have been educated in a Han-dominant environment for a long time, they do not possess enough understanding of their own ethnic cultures[3], which has triggered strong emotions.

If I was truly knowledgeable about the Mongolian culture, then I could share it with those who do not know about it. The problem is that I do not know much about it. I feel so sad and ashamed (*youhe mianmu*). I even got ten bonus marks in my Gaokao[4] and enjoyed so much benefit from my ethnic identity, but I have not done much for it.

This account evokes the 'pathological pain' that the Inner Mongolian anthropologist Bulag (2003, 755) felt when he realised that he was 'failing to fulfil the lineal development of the Mongolian nationality, the very entity to which [he] belong[ed], voluntarily or involuntarily'. For Bulag, 'the success [he] achieved through Chinese education haunted [him], as it alienated [him] from [his] own cultural heritage' (p 753). Dolkar, too, revealed:

I know little about my own ethnic culture. People from my ethnic group often find that students like me who are in *neidi ban* speak fluent Mandarin Chinese, but get tongue-tied when speaking our mother tongue (Tibetan). Therefore, they

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often speak ill of us behind our back. Sometimes when Han students ask me about my culture and religion, I cannot answer them. I feel extremely ashamed of myself. A Tibetan even said this to my face: 'You are just a Han person, you have been completely Hanified (*hanhua*)'. At that moment, I was extremely sad, and I debated with him for a long time.

The public scrutiny that Dolkar was subjected to revolved around her 'ethnic authenticity' (Yang, 2018). Kayongo-Male and Lee (2004) suggest that ethnic definition is subject to the construction and negotiation of their own members, depending on the relative power of the actors involved. Although Dolkar's educational mobilities had equipped her with fluent Han-language proficiency, what Postiglione (2009, 487) calls 'Han cultural capital', such acquisition has rendered it problematic for her to claim a *legitimate* ethnic position back home.

Two patterns of temporality of ethnic othering could be discerned from both cases: having developed a minority identity through the majoritarian gaze, yet at the same time having internalized a peripheral group membership within their own ethnic groups. In Dolkar's case, she was sub-categorised into the least authentic group among her own ethnic community because of her Hanified outlook. Her educational mobilities thus rendered her in a peripheral position within her own ethnic group, consolidated within her own ethnic understanding. Guoxiang similarly commented that in the eyes of 'real' ethnic Mongolians, she and her family, having been Hanified for such a long time, act in 'touristic' manners regarding ethnic rituals and living styles, such as drinking horse milk tea.

Temporality of ethnic identity awakening

For both students, educational mobilities have positively awakened their ethnic identities, to encounter role models and consciously reflect on their imagined ethnic futures. In Hong Kong, Guoxiang met an ethnic Mongolian writer from Taiwan, Mumu (a pseudonym), to

whom Guoxiang became a personal assistant during her internship at a local magazine. Guoxiang recalled, 'When I was talking to Mumu…I felt that there was some special quality (*tezhi*) or potential labels that could be explored in me—it was like my ethnicity was awakened'.

Before Hong Kong, Guoxiang was in Beijing and had experienced various discriminations and negative stereotypes of her own ethnic group, which pushed her to avoid mentioning her ethnic identity whenever she could. She recollected that once, a human resources staff member at a Beijing company that she worked for was impressed by her performance. However, upon learning that she was from Inner Mongolia, this person commented: 'Oh, I see, you must have very good family education then'. Guoxiang felt annoyed by it because:

> This is outright geographic discrimination. In his mind, Inner Mongolia is an under-developed province and so is its education, so there ought not to be high-quality talent there (Xu 2017).

The positivity of Mumu as an ethnic icon, and as a role model for Guoxiang, could be easily discerned when she recalled a significant incident. Mumu was giving a lecture in Hong Kong:

> I felt that there were many things that I had always tried to leave behind my back, to conceal them, because I had no time for them…now here is such a person who can speak to more than a thousand people in a place like the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, about Inner Mongolia. And so many people are listening carefully (to her) in awe (Xu 2017).

Alluding to Hong Kong's cosmopolitan milieu, where English plays a dominant role and its socio-political environment, in which sentiments towards 'mainlanders' have been fraught with uncomfortable tensions over the past two decades (Xu 2015b), Guoxiang

admitted that her main initial struggles were owing to her lack of English proficiency and the 'mainlander' identity. Consequently, her ethnic identity was yet another extra label to which she could not devote her spare time. Mumu's example, therefore, allowed Guoxiang to see hope in her potential ethnic future, as she was now able to emulate an influential ethnic figure like Mumu.

Parallel to Guoxiang, Dolkar's ethnicity was strengthened after her witnessing the 'cruelty' of her Han peers in denying educational inequalities among ethnic groups in a Sociology of Education module she took in 2015-2016. Ten out of her 21 Han classmates insisted that there was no such inequality, despite the lecturer's explanation that being members of the Han majority can entail inadvertent identity and resource advantages (Tatum 1999). Seeing this, Dolkar stood up to share her educational experiences, revealing her marginalisation, powerlessness and struggles. She was so emotional that she burst into tears. The other students in the class comforted her, but still maintained their view. This incident brought new revelations to Dolkar:

> In my previous life, I was not somebody who would actively express my opinions…However, gradually I realised that silence could push me into a corner, turn me into *an invisible being* (*yinxingren*), and nobody would even care about me or show understanding towards me (our emphasis).

As a result, Dolkar began to harness an agentic persona, to actively 'voice out' the concerns of her ethnic group and beyond.

> At the very beginning, my 'voicing out' was 'outward orientated' (*duiwaide*), it was about (voicing out) an explanation for the labels that others have assigned on 'you'. Then, (the voicing out) was about making complaints about (*kongsu*) certain 'injustice', about resisting encroachment in daily life, that even if you may not be able to change certain things, at least you should let other people or yourself know that this is unjust, and that social injustice actually exists. Lastly, it

is about voicing out for myself…This kind of 'voicing out' can only be achieved through my own hard work.

Dolkar went on to demonstrate what she meant by her 'hard work': 'to increase her weighting' (*fenliang*) through sitting the postgraduate entrance exams (*kaoyan*). She explained:

To me, to pursue postgraduate studies is a self-nurturing and enriching process, in which my thinking becomes clearer and clearer. Moreover, this will bring along a kind of halo, perhaps even some authority…In my future career, perhaps some degree titles can increase opportunities for other people to 'listen to me'.

Dolkar considered *kaoyan* as having the potential to reap bigger rewards, in order to compensate for the sacrifices (emotional, familial, etc) that she and her family had both paid through her educational mobilities. More importantly, she placed a great deal of hope and weighting, or expectation, on postgraduate qualifications, the 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 2000, 242) that became a pivotal means to command the attention necessary for her to be listened to.

These critical incidents all seemed to have presented possibilities for Guoxiang and Dolkar as ethnic beings, rather than feeling powerless as they previously did. However, such positive ethnic awakening was diminished when confronted with reality, compelling them to construct two schemes of temporalities: the 'worldly time' and 'ethnic time'.

Temporality of 'worldly time' and 'ethnic time'

'Worldly pursuits' or 'voicing out'

Although Guoxiang and Dolkar started to see positive potential in their ethnic futures, both revealed a clear sense of 'time poverty' and 'resource poverty' (Thompson and Cook 2017, 27) regarding their ethnic explorations. Guoxiang recalled that after her discussion with

Mumu about her ethnicity, she predicted that

> I would not have too many opportunities to seriously explore this matter, e.g.
> learning the Mongolian language, studying its different histories…this is not my
> top priority…My life has not reached that stage when I backtrack (*zhuisu*) or
> root-search (*xungen*). Instead I am desperately trying to go outward
> (*wangwaizou*), I have been desperately trying to go to the United States, to
> understand the American culture, to go to Australia and the UK…I feel now that I
> do not have such energy and luxury to think about my ethnicity…I can make
> good use of these few years or decades to expand my boundaries, the broader the
> better…and as for things that are in me, such as…Mongolian culture, I feel that
> this is an inward-coming process (*neishou*); to me, these are things to do after I
> am 40 years old.

Guoxiang seemed to have internalised the ethics of being time-thrift, which regulated
how she related to the world, including ethnic and non-ethnic related matters. She demarcated
her life into two different dimensions: outward ventures versus inward root-searching
(*xungen*) and back-tracking (*zhuisu*). She further assigned different dimensions of tasks to
different life stages. At her current stage (i.e. in her twenties and thirties), her main task was
to explore outwards, whereas in her forties and later, she will probably turn inwards.
Guoxiang's survival strategies were conditioned by her perception of the imbalanced power
dynamics between Han and ethnic minorities, between the geo-political centres and
peripheries (Xu 2017). She learned from her experiences that she had to first 'gain a foothold'
within the more powerful, dominant and cosmopolitan spheres before she could voice out for
her ethnic group.

Here, we note two identities embodied by Guoxiang: the cosmopolitan and the ethnic.
The parallel identities are intrinsically related to Guoxiang's more complicated educational
mobilities: first in Beijing, the capital city of China with Han Chinese as the dominant group,
and later at the cross-border city Hong Kong, a special administrative region with a more

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diverse ethnic and racial profile that has a long history of imagining the 'underdevelopment' of mainlanders (Xu 2015a). Different from Guoxiang, Dolkar has mostly situated her ethnic identity in relation to her national identity. Since she has not yet experienced cross-border educational mobilities, she rarely discusses such ideas as 'cosmopolitan' but focuses more within the confines of national geographical boundaries. Yet, as Dolkar revealed, her limited thinking or lack of ambition to explore globally might be constrained by the difficulties for Tibet household registration holders to get passports or visas in China, even though she underlined on many occassions that she was a law-abiding Chinese. The difficulty in getting a visa for Tibetans with a Tibet Autonomous Region Household Registration has been widely reported by international media, such as Radio Free Asia (2015) and others, but has been not publically acknowledged by Chinese officials.

Similar to Guoxiang, Dolkar recognised the lack of opportunity for her to pursue further understanding of her ethnic cultural heritage at present and placed her hope in the future.

> I feel that [my educational mobilities] engendered a rupture between me and my ethnic culture…Perhaps for the ethnic culture studies that I have missed I can make it up in the future by working hard on them.

This strategy again is based on her current priority of pursuing postgraduate studies. Both students' imagination of the future as necessarily better, friendlier towards their ethnic heritage pursuits, is noteworthy. Their strategies necessitate a new conceptual understanding of time in relation to ethnicity. That is, given the national ethnic and cultural power hierarchy (Yi and Wang 2012) as well as global cultural hierarchy (Hansen 2015), both students have clearly delineated two schemes of time, the 'worldly time' and the 'ethnic time'. These two schemes have entirely different dimensions, pace, and associations.

The 'ethnic time' is premised on three principal beliefs: (a) the future as progress, as

'better' than now; (b) the ethnic exploration is recreational and is slow-paced; (c) the ethnic cultural heritage is stable, fixed, always there, and ready to be retrieved on demand. In parallel, the 'worldly time' is based on three key beliefs: (a) the present stage is for instrumental causes, including the pursuit of power, status, cultural and social resources; (b) time spent on such 'worldly' pursuits is fast-paced and if not grasped, will slip away; (c) the other more distant, dominant cultures are fluid and demand instant pursuit.

Regarding how they imagine the future, both Guoxiang and Dolkar have placed substantial hope in being able to do what they cannot do in their present lives. This is encapsulated by Hansen's (2015) argument that 'modern, striving individuals are particularly invested in the future and disposed to pursue personal development towards projected futures' (p 50). When asked what kind of life she aspired to have, Dolkar intimated:

> I hope in my future life there will be less segregation…I plan to return to Tibet. I feel that I have left my family for too long[5]. Up to now, my parents have had to get used to me spending only a few months with them every year. I hope that in the future I can be the one to accommodate my parents' life. I enjoy spending time on circling Tibetan prayer wheels (*zhuanjing*) with friends and relatives. This is what I look forward to.

Dolkar imagines compensating for her regrets in the future by spending more time with her family. This is based on a sense of guilt that she had accumulated up to the present. The kind of life in this imagined future will also be leisurely and slow-paced. This is in sharp contrast to Dolkar's present life:

> I am prepared that if I cannot pass the National Postgraduate Entrance Exam for the first time, I will give it a second try. My path to taking the exam is perhaps not promising, but I will no longer stay in my comfort zone; I am prepared to face more challenges.

In Guoxiang's case, her ethnic role model Mumu's advice for her to 'gain a firm

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foothold' and that someday she would be able to 'get something done' alluded to what she could do to promote her ethnic culture to a broader audience, but also, more importantly, for her to trace her own roots. Guoxiang continued: 'I feel that being ethnic Mongolian is one aspect that I hope to *slowly* explore in the future and see if there is anything meaningful for me to establish my identity'. This notion that ethnic exploration is slow-paced is consolidated by her priorities at present:

> When I was younger, I could feel happy for no reason...Now when I see books that I used to enjoy, I will still feel, for a second or two, that pure happiness I felt as a child... However, the next second, I would think, I had better get on with writing my personal statements, or get back to practise those exam questions, and I should leave this for later. It is not urgent now, I don't have time for this.

Guoxiang seemed to depict a sense that she was washed along by the strong current of present urgencies that demanded her full attention. The distinction that she drew between 'pure delight' and 'instrumental striving' can be most vividly captured in the following quote that marked the beginning point of her educational mobilities:

> After I started at university…I was in a rush to gain a firm foothold, so I feel I am quite utilitarian sometimes, not only in my studies, but most of the time I am in a hurry to look for a way to do something useful. Now if I want to learn to paint, it is not because I want to paint, but because I want to gain a tool to calm myself down when I am in a bad mood. If I want to study music, it is not only for music, but in order to perform singing at gatherings…

As Guoxiang cultivated such pragmatic approaches in life, she also lamented losing the pure joy that she cherished as a child. The utilitarianism seemed to be forced on her, given the various 'worldly' demands with which she was confronted. Guoxiang's and Dolkar's striving evokes Hansen's (2015) depiction of contemporary Chinese elite students, who are always 'striving to get ahead, and spurred by the fear of falling behind' (p 53).

Both Dolkar and Guoxiang seemed to envisage a future when they can pursue what they cannot afford to do at present. Such redemptive strategies resonated with Lingard and Thompson's (2017) argument that 'there is an implicit better, more socially just, imagined future, indicative of its modernist lineage' (p 4). We argue that both Dolkar and Guoxiang were carrying the 'redemptive' orientation towards their ethnicity, their own lack of ethnic understanding in the present in relation to their imagined better, more affluent social positions, and the potential to improve the positioning of their respective ethnic groups. Hence, this redemption 'as a concept is, of course, a temporal one, oriented as it is to correcting past and present injustices for a better future' (p 4).

The deferral of the 'permanent' ethnic identity to an imagined future

Another notable feature of the two schemes of temporality is both students understood their ethnic identity as ascribed, fixed and stable. Guoxiang suggested, 'I feel the label of my ethnic identity is always on me', while Dolkar said 'In the narrower sense, my ethnic identity is fixed for me, this is a pre-designated identity, and there is no need to explore it, because it is there'. This essentialist view of ethnic identities was also manifested in their understanding in terms of distance: ethnic identity as localised and closer in proximity while cosmopolitan identities are seen as being remote. Comparing herself with ethnic peers who remained in Tibet for their education, Dolkar surmised that, 'Perhaps if I stayed home and got educated locally, I would become a strongly ethno-nationalist person (*minzu zhuyi*).'

Underpinning these two schemes of temporality is an understanding that time is a commodity, a currency, a rare good that should be deployed wisely and strategically to gain the right kinds of resources at the correct stages of one's life. As ethnic minority students competing in an environment in which multiple hierarchies intersect to reinforce the positioning of their respective ethnic groups, i.e. at the lower strata of multiple hierarchies,

both students felt they were not in control, dominated, and at risk of becoming invisible and voiceless. Both students were, therefore, compelled to constantly strive, be competitive, 'step out of their comfort zone', and be utilitarian and instrumental. In both cases, they find their present environments full of pressure, which resulted in an 'acceleration of time in a race to not fall behind, but keep up, go forward, progress' (Hansen 2015, 53).

Notably, the distinction between the 'ethnic time' and 'worldly time' can sometimes intersect. Ethnic identities can become instrumental in the striving for worldly returns. For example, Guoxiang capitalised on her ethnicity to be assigned as Mumu's personal assistant and Dolkar took advantage of her ethnicity to assume leadership roles in the Association of Tibetan Culture at her university. Dolkar also conveniently chose topics related to Tibet when completing term papers and scored high marks. Here we note how ethnicity empowered ethnic minority students and helped them stand out in positive ways. Nevertheless, these ethnic characteristics also put minority students in contradictory situations. As Dolkar revealed:

> I feel that when I live away from home…it is quite a nice way to make my ethnic identity stand out by 'fitting in' (*hequn*). However, I really dislike this way, so much so that I have become excluded from the circle of 'fitting-ins'.

In a sense, being an ethnic minority in a Han-dominated region, it was an advantageous thing to play the 'ethnic' card. That is, to act 'ethnic' in order to fit in. This echoes what Yi and Wang (2012) observe as some of the main tactics of their Tibetan participants who 'retreat into ethnic particularism' (p 76) to ensure a continuity of their self-worth. However, Dolkar disliked fitting into this social expectation of her 'ethnic' display, and ended up feeling excluded.

Dolkar's refusal to 'act ethnic' and Guoxiang's acknowledgment of her utilitarian approaches towards ethnicity in their jockeying for 'worldly' pursuits seem to indicate some

self-conscious guilt about such strategising. It was as if being disadvantaged should be the norm, and taking advantage of it was wrong. This fundamental discomfort again points to their clear demarcation of the ethnic for pure knowledge seeking and cultural heritage searching.

Discussion and Conclusion

Using temporality as an analytical construct, this paper set out to explore the impact of educational mobilities on the ethnic identity construction of students from two different ethnic groups in China. By juxtaposing in-depth empirical data of a Mongolian and a Tibetan student from two separate research projects, we presented some intriguing similarities with nuanced differences in their ethnic identity construction by examining the intersections between ethnicity, temporality and mobilities. Three patterns of temporalities are deployed in the students' temporal processes of ethnic identity construction: temporality of ethnic othering, temporality of ethnic identity awakening and temporality of 'worldly time' and 'ethnic time'.

The two minority students were both from middle-class family backgrounds and were privileged to access educational opportunities through mobility. Guoxiang experienced cross-border educational mobility by completing her preparatory education in Beijing, her Bachelor's at a Hong Kong university, working in Beijing and later pursuing a Master's Degree in the United States. Dolkar's educational mobility started as early as 12 years old. Having been immersed in dominant Han culture for a long time, both were alienated in various ways as their 'authenticity' was challenged by ethnic peers. This effectively subjected them to the peripheries of their respective ethnic communities. Meanwhile, their families' higher socioeconomic status and their familiarity with dominant Han culture have not exempted them from suffering ethnic stereotypes, prejudices and discriminations. In China's

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current scheme of ethnic hierarchies, cultures of ethnic minorities are so exoticised, eroticised and historicised that they mainly serve as entertaining subjects in the margins of the dominant group's private and public life (Gladney 1994; Yang 2017b, 9; Yi 2008, 111). In Hong Kong, the 'mainlander' vs 'Hongkonger' tensions and lack of attention paid to ethnic minorities could present an added layer of alienation (Xu 2017).

For a long time both students had internalised such marginalised and voiceless ethnic statuses while shutting away from any ethnic talk that might further disempower them. Critical incidents at certain stages of their educational mobilities had awakened them to their ethnicities. In Guoxiang's case, Mumu served as an ethnic role model who empowered her positive ethnic imagination. For Dolkar, the Sociology of Education class on 'educational equality' served as a catalyst for ethnic revelation. Witnessing the constant marginalisation and voicelessness of their ethnic groups, they finally felt the urge to 'voice out' their discontent and to 'fight for the rights' of their ethnic groups, although their strategies were still conditioned by the majority/minority, dominant/dominated, powerful/powerless, central/peripheral, and visible/invisible dichotomies. Sensing that 'ethnicity is a luxury' at the current paradigm of time thrift, they prioritised their 'worldly' pursuits of social status, monetary and materialistic goals, and simultaneously resorted to leaving their respective ethnic explorations for the *future*. This can be explained by their temporal mode of striving and the redemptive nature of their thinking in relation to their ethnic identity and ethnic cultural heritage.

Concomitantly, we note two schemes of time from Guoxiang's and Dolkar's reflective accounts: that of the 'worldly time' and that of 'ethnic time', each of which entails a distinctive set of understandings about pace in life, priorities and importance. For Guoxiang, her 'worldly time' was closely linked to a cosmopolitan orientation in which she prioritised engaging with the outside world not only within China but also abroad. For Dolkar, her

'worldly time' was intently tied to a national focus that foregrounded time to compete with Han peers within the national ethnic hierarchy to establish and empower herself with a voice. There was thus notable perceived time poverty when it came to the 'ethnic time', primarily owing to the overwhelming urgency to prioritise other worldly pursuits in order to gain their foothold with a view to getting their voices heard. Consequently, the 'ethnic time' took a backseat, deferred to the imagined future. Here, we observe the formation of 'hybridised' ethnic identities which transcend the essentialised "old ethnicities" (Hall 2005) through their various and multiple mobile educational experiences, evoking Hall's (2003, 235) characterisation of diaspora identities which 'live with and through, not despite, difference, by hybridity' and are 'constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.'

While it is not our intent to generalise our findings to all educationally mobile ethnic minority students in China, we argue that these two 'rhythms of timelines' (Thompson and Cook 2017, 33) extrapolated from the in-depth and longitudinal accounts of these two students reveal a striking array of structural and social inequalities embedded in educational mobilities and ethnic relations in contemporary China. The dominant group's consistent stereotypical negative portrayals of and indifference towards ethnic minorities we find in this study have served as a crystallising factor in demarcating the timelines of their search for ethnicity. Although preferential treatment (positive discrimination) has been offered to ethnic minorities to counter this structural inequality, the image of ethnic minorities as 'preferentially treated' and 'less capable' (Yang 2017b, 239) has re-consolidated their marginalisation in the current unequal ethnic structure, which has the potential to deprive ethnic identities and cultures. Therefore, our findings in this paper not only stimulate discussions and debates on ethnicity, temporality and educational mobility, but also contribute to 'making and implementing policies of social inclusion for migrant and

indigenous ethnic minorities' in China (Li and Heath 2017, 1).

Our reflections concerning Guoxiang's and Dolkar's ethnic identities constructions point to fruitful analytical engagement with 'temporality' in ethnic terms. First, 'temporality' is closely linked to the changing locations and relocations of ethnic minority groups. Second, time can be multi-dimensional and can be designated for inward or outward explorations. Adopting the gaze of the dominant others, Guoxiang and Dolkar subconsciously constructed an essentialist view of their ethnic cultures and conceptualised their ethnic identities as fixed, stable and 'always there waiting to be retrieved'. In contrast, the dominant cultures are conceptualised as alive and fluid. For both students, critical incidents along their educational mobilities have not only empowered them in ethnic terms, but also awakened them to sense a pronounced distance from their own ethnic cultures. This distance is emotional and primordial. Hence, the entanglement of space and distance also offers useful insights for understanding 'temporality', especially if we examine their ethnic identities over an extended period.

Table 1: Educational Mobility Trajectories of Guoxiang and Dolkar

	Guoxiang		**Dolkar**
Basic information	Ethnicity: Mongolian Birthplace: Inner Mongolia Family background: middle-class Father: entrepreneur Mother: civil servant	Basic information	Ethnicity: Tibetan Birthplace: Tibet Family background: middle-class Father: local cadre Mother: local cadre
2010-2011	From Inner Mongolia to Beijing for her preparatory	2007-2011	From Tibet to Fujian for Junior High School,

	year		Neidiban
2011-2014 2014 (around 5 months)	Undergraduate studies in Hong Kong Exchange semester in the UK	2011-2014	From Fujian to Chongqing for Senior High School, Neidiban
2014-2017	Work in Beijing	2014-Now	From Chongqing to Xiamen for University
2017-	Graduate school in the US	Now	Preparing for the National Postgraduate Entrance Examination

Notes

[1] Tibetan and Uyghur groups are among the 55 officially-recognised ethnic minority groups in China, a country that is dominated by Han, the majority ethnic group.

[2] Microblogging, the Chinese version of Twitter.

[3] While Dolkar moved to study at inland schools since age 12, Guoxiang was educated in a Han-language school in Inner Mongolia before entering university.

[4] The National College Entrance Examination.

[5] At the time of writing, Dolkar has been away from home for around 11 years. According to Wang and Zhou (2003), it usually takes around 11-12 years for Tibetan students to complete their *neidi* study experience up to college education.

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