Examining Burmese students' multilingual practices and identity positionings at a border high school in China

Jia Li, School of Foreign Languages, Yunnan University, Kunming, China
Bin Ai, School of Foreign Studies, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai, China
Cora Lingling Xu, School of Education, Durham University, Durham, UK

Abstract

This study explores a cohort of Burmese students' lived experiences at a border high school in China and demonstrates that their multilingual practices and identity positionings constitute exclusionary effects that limit their interactions with their local Chinese teachers and peers. The paper argues that these Burmese students' in-group interactions reproduce the process of exclusion, further complicating their identity positionings. This paper confirms the established fact that transnational students are marginalized in a variety of national contexts in complex ways, and draws attention to in-group differences among transnational students with diverse backgrounds. These findings have implications for multilingual practices and education policy makers, and for a more inclusive pedagogical approach to reducing marginalization and educating students of diverse linguistic, cultural, and racial backgrounds for global citizenship.

Keywords

Burmese students, border high school, in-group interactions, multilingual practices, identity positionings

Introduction

Nowadays, an increasing number of students no longer seek their transnational study destinations in mainly Anglophone and European countries; some Asian countries are emerging as favored destinations for them. For instance, the bulk of transnational educational cooperation and cultural exchanges have taken place between China's neighboring Southeast Asian countries and its border regions such as Yunnan and Guangxi (Yang, 2012). Many students from these neighboring countries of China, in particular, students from Myanmar, select Yunnan province as their transnational study destination because of the relatively low living costs, close geographical proximity to their home countries, and China's geo-economic engagement with Myanmar (Su, 2016). These students from Myanmar are very likely to encounter challenges in China, much as Chinese students have experienced experienced many difficulties in language, culture and academic learning while studying in an unfamiliar host environment (Ryan, 2005). Given the fact that there are over 15,000,000 inhabitants of over 30 ethnic backgrounds living at the China–Myanmar border (Lu, 2006), the shared kinship and blood ties among cross-border groups might also pose additional challenges for Burmese students of diverse backgrounds receiving China's formal education. However, there is not much research regarding Burmese students' multilingual communication and identity positioning, and whether there is microaggression and

internal contradiction when these students are communicating with cultural outsiders and insiders in China has not yet been investigated.

This study aims to bridge the research gap by examining multilingual practices and identity positionings of a cohort of Burmese students at a border high school in Yunnan, China. The paper starts with a literature review of previous studies on how transnational students' lived experiences are shaped by various social dimensions and how they use agentive strategies to reposition themselves. It then discusses the complicated conflicts and tensions of Burmese students' multilingual learning and identity positionings in the border high school. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for practices of hosting transnational students from other countries.

Linguistic and educational obstacles to transnational students' positionings

When talking about the issue of identity positioning, transnational students, along with (or as part of) other minority groups, often find themselves marginalized in one way or another because they face linguistic and other social and cultural barriers to education, including: a lack of proficiency in the language of instruction (Pérez-Milans and Patiño-Santos, 2014; Ryu, 2015); lack of access to the standard language of the destination country (Simpson and Cooke, 2009); a disjunct between formal education in the country of origin and in the destination country (Hatoss et al., 2012); and the prevailing low socioeconomic status of transnational children and their families (Guan et al., 2016). Host educational institutions may intend to bridge the gaps and lower the barriers for transnational students, yet very often their policies may end up aggravating their disadvantages.

Rather than addressing the linguistic difficulties, some language development programs may remove transnational students from mainstream education (Kanno and Kangas, 2014; Menken and Kleyn, 2010) and place them into low-track programs, in which they are deprived of equal access to school resources and quality teaching (Faltis and Arias, 2007; Martín Rojo, 2010). Standardized assessment may exclude transnational students if it fails to consider the diverse backgrounds of these students, by focusing on testing the knowledge of the dominant group with middle-class backgrounds (Wright, 2002) and overlooking transnational students' cultural and language barriers (Brown et al., 2006). This disadvantage may be compounded if the test score is used to justify streaming them into low-track classes or excluding them altogether (Piller, 2016).

Transnational students as agents in multilingual practices and identity positionings

Transnational students engage actively in mobilizing linguistic and cultural resources to navigate their multiple identities and to enhance their status. For example, by using their home language, transnational students can help each other with their courses and improve their academic performance (Bruna, 2007). Transnational students' family, religious, and border resources may help them to develop bilingual competence and biliteracy to complement monolingual schooling experiences (Ceballos, 2012).

Through modifying their accents in an attempt to conform to the dominant variety of a language, transnational students seek to avoid being singled out as outsiders (Gu and Tong, 2012). By associating themselves with global consumption and cultural practices like speaking English (Gu and Patkin, 2013) and doing hip-hop (Jeffries, 2011), transnational students may seek to position themselves as superior to their local peers.

Transnational students may employ dominant discourses against other minority groups and further disadvantage their minority peers. For example, a recent study of Latino and African American transnational students in the USA found that intra-ethnic frictions may be triggered by a family's negative experiences and the social discourses of wider society (Clonanroy et al., 2016). Internal frictions arose between Taiwanese and Shanghainese who were doing high school studies in California, USA, with the former seeing the latter as of a lower class, and the latter, who have fair skins, making derogatory remarks against the darker-skinned Taiwanese (Mckay and Wong, 1996). Tensions also arose between first-generation and second-generation migrant students from the same ethnic background (Shin, 2012). These transnational students are marginalized in one way or another, and the forms of discriminatory practices are both explicit and implicit.

Facing linguistic teasing from peers, some transnational students choose to be silent, whereas others adopt active strategies to reposition themselves by constructing their cosmopolitan identities. For example, newly arrived Korean students who lacked knowledge of the local culture in Canada and who spoke poor English were perceived by long-term, established Korean Canadians as 'fresh off the boat' (Shin, 2012: 184). In Shin's study, the newcomers, who possessed a privileged social status in Korea, contested such inferior positioning by drawing on global consumption styles, like living in middle-class residential areas, following updated fashion trends, investing in costly activities, and paying for private tutoring, so as to distinguish themselves from long-term Korean counterparts.

About this study

The border high school and the participants

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic state; in population, political and economic life and linguistically/culturally, the dominant ethnicity of the country is Burman, but in the China–Myanmar borderland, other ethnic groups constitute the numeric majority. At the border high school chosen for this study, the ratio of Burmese students (33) to local Chinese students (around 4000) was 0.7:100 when the fieldwork was conducted. This border high school was selected for three reasons. First, it is officially registered in Yunnan for recruiting Myanmar students with scholarship support, and their certificate is recognized by the Chinese government. Second, this school is located in Tengchong, a small county in Yunnan, which is an ancestral hometown for over 200,000 ethnic Chinese who migrated to Myanmar between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Given their ancestral connections, Tengchong is attractive for this ethnic Chinese group. Third, the distance from Tengchong to Myitkyina, the capital city of Kachin state,

Myanmar, is approximately 100 kilometres, and the geographical proximity allows for Burmese students' transnational movements. Burmese students at this school can return to Myanmar once every semester, and some home visits are possible during Chinese festivals, which may (re)shape their language and identity positioning.

The assigned ethnicity (as per their identity cards) of these participants is predominantly Chinese, but Tai, Lisu, Lashi, and Lhaovo ethnicities also feature. These participants are diverse with regard to their language repertoires, ethnic self-affiliations, and educational and family backgrounds. The term 'Burmese students' is used throughout because it is an emic term that fits the group at this school; it is not an ethno-linguistic identification but a nationality designation, although the citizenship status of some Burmese students is contentious. In this study, none of the participants referred to as a Burmese student is ethnically Burman. These participants finished nine years of education in Chinese supplementary schools in Myanmar. It is noted that, in Myanmar, Chinese supplementary schools followed different educational systems: those from Lweje and Panwa used the Chinese learning materials imported from mainland China, whereas those from Myitkyina followed the Taiwanese educational system. Their enrolment in this border school was recommended by their Chinese supplementary schools, and some students were funded with China's scholarships. When the fieldwork was conducted, these participants were in their second year of senior high school. The background information of these participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Background information of the participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Residential area in Myanmar	Language(s) spoken prior to entering school	Years of schooling at government schools in Myanmar
P1	M	Chinese	Lweje	Yunnan Mandarin	0
P2	M	Chinese	Lweje	Yunnan Mandarin	2
P3	M	Chinese	Lweje	Yunnan Mandarin	3
P4	F	Chinese	Lweje	Yunnan Mandarin	3
P5	F	Lhaovo	Panwa	Lhaovo, Lashi	3
P6	M	Tai	Lweje	Yunnan Mandarin	4
P7	M	Tai	Lweje	Tai	4
P8	M	Tai	Lweje	Yunnan Mandarin	4
P9	F	Lhaovo	Panwa	Lhaovo, Lashi	4
P10	F	Lhaovo	Panwa	Lhaovo, Lashi	4
P11	M	Lashi	Panwa	Lashi, Lhaovo	4
P12	F	Lisu	Panwa	Lisu	4
P13	M	Lisu	Panwa	Lisu	4
P14	M	Tai	Myitkyina	Yunnan Mandarin, Tai	4
P15	F	Chinese	Myitkyina	Yunnan Mandarin	7
P16	M	Chinese	Myitkyina	Yunnan Mandarin	9
P17	F	Chinese	Myitkyina	Yunnan Mandarin, Burmese	10

P18	F	Chinese	Myitkyina	Yunnan Mandarin	10
P19	F	Chinese	Myitkyina	Yunnan Mandarin	11
P20	M	Chinese	Myitkyina	Yunnan Mandarin	11
P21	F	Chinese	Myitkyina	Yunnan Mandarin	12
P22	M	Chinese	Muse	Yunnan Mandarin	12
P23	M	Chinese	Muse	Yunnan Mandarin	13

Questions

In this study, the following three questions are asked:

1) What external social categories mediated Burmese students' experiences of microaggression and constituted their experiences of exclusion in this school?
2) What linguistic, social, and cultural differences produced Burmese students' internal contradictions in their educational experiences in this school?
3) How did Burmese students employ agentive instructions to navigate their sense of marginalization, and how effective were they?

Data collection and analysis

Case study research was adopted in this study since it affords a way to examine these participants in a detailed, situated, and holistic manner (Yin, 2009). This case study was conducted for three months, after the first researcher was introduced by the principal and authorised to begin the fieldwork. Data were collected from multiple sources with the written agreement of these participants. The collected documents include the first researcher's participant observation notes in and outside the classroom, and individual counternarratives (Chase, 2018; Kennedy et al., 2019). Institutional documents, including annual reports, timetables, syllabi, teaching materials, examination sheets, posters, mural paintings, exercise books, assignments, compositions, and diaries were also collected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, with lengths of between 30 and 90 minutes. Meanwhile, three focus group interviews were conducted with these participants from three regions.

A transnational and trans-local perspective was adopted to analyse issues related to their multilingual practices and identity positionings. All the data were coded and analysed using an inductive approach, and emerging themes were subjected to content analysis (Krippendorff and Bock, 2008). The researchers identified recurring salient patterns according to frequency of occurrence and relevance to school practices and transnational education. Emerging themes were developed inductively from the bottom up. Through the continuous coding and recoding process, general themes were identified as: *external microaggressions experienced by the participants*; *internal contradictions among the participants* (mainly caused by different classes, ethnicities, and languages); and their *agentive practices* in navigating marginalization and identity positionings.

Findings and discussion

External microaggressions encountered by the participants

It was not unusual to observe these participants position themselves as the racial 'others' during their daily conflicts. Racially charged remarks were usually related to their supposed lack of hygiene and values, and these remarks were ingrained in the everyday experiences of Burmese students. In the interview, P4 recalled her unpleasant experience with local Chinese students who mocked her and her country:

> [They said] is it true that you Myanmar people go to the toilet without using toilet paper but using hands?
> Your Myanmar, I am not going there even if you let me be the President there！

Such remarks were relatively indirect, casual, but exclusionary. The racialized remarks were also heard when the first researcher once observed that when a group of Burmese students were watching 'Voice of China', a national singing contest, a local Chinese student passing by noticed this and commented as follows:

> Wow, even you guys are watching 'the Voice of China'?

This local Chinese student's question suggested that he was surprised that Burmese students were viewers of a 'Chinese' TV show. Yet, these Burmese students from the border region have been brought up in a cultural environment that is almost identical to that of their Chinese peers. One participant described the influence of the Chinese-related environment in their everyday life in Lweje, Myanmar:

> We use the same telecommunication network as China, and we use Renminbi [Chinese Yuan] as well. We can speak Chinese, and there is no difference from China. (Interview with P1)

Some commented on the Burmese students' physical appearance, as the first researcher overheard during her fieldwork in the school:

> I just can't believe that you are Burmese people! (Overheard at a school canteen) You look so much like Chinese people! (Overheard on the sports field)

Racial othering (Draper et al., 2019) was offensive to Burmese ethnic Chinese students who had just arrived at this school, and who had strong emotional, social, and economic attachments to China as their *zuguo* (homeland of birthplace). For example, P4, who saw herself as no different from the local nationals, invoked her Chinese identity against the racial discrimination that she encountered:

> We are also Chinese. … We have the same blood, the same skin, and the same colour of eyes, don't we? (Informal conversation with P4)

However, despite her claim to racial legitimacy, P4 and other Burmese ethnic Chinese were not perceived as legitimate Chinese, partly because of different linguistic habitus. Prior to migration, these participants expected that their use of Putonghua, a standard

Mandarin used in mainland China, would improve rapidly once they had chances to interact with local Chinese peers on a daily basis. However, they found that they had few opportunities to interact with local Chinese peers at this school. Even if they did, their local peers did not speak Putonghua either.

> Before coming here, I had thought that they [local Chinese students] all spoke Putonghua. I asked them why they did not speak Putonghua, and they said 'this is the way we speak'. (Interview with P4)

Though the majority of these participants can speak Yunnan Mandarin, a non-standard Putonghua used in Yunnan, as their mother tongue, Yunnan Mandarin, like a Yunnan dialect, does not make it easier for them to interact with local Chinese peers, because local students usually do not accept Burmese students as speakers of Yunnan Mandarin. Here, a local Chinese student describes his impression of Burmese students when he played basketball with them on the sports ground:

> I know a few Myanmar male students in that class, like that boy, thin and tall, wearing *Longyi*, and he plays basketball well. … Their Chinese is a bit different from ours, a bit weird.

Many local Chinese people cannot or do not want to understand the Yunnan Mandarin used by these participants. As a native speaker of Yunnan Mandarin, the first researcher never encountered any communication barriers with Burmese students when speaking in Yunnan Mandarin. It appears that the explanation for the fact that local Chinese students had difficulty understanding the Yunnan Mandarin used by the participants did not lie in linguistic factors but in their perceptions of linguistic otherness and expectations of language problems (Piller, 2011). In other words, local Chinese students' refusal might be related to the fact that they perceived these students as 'unworthy' in other ways, in nationality and race.

Internal contradictions and differentiations among Burmese students

Despite being perceived as homogenous by local Chinese teachers and peers, these participants were different from each other in their language, ethnicity, educational background, culture, religion, and family socioeconomic conditions. These factors intersected with Burmese students' lived experiences at this school and constituted an exclusionary hierarchy within ethnic minorities of Burmese students. For example, at this school, Putonghua is used as the medium of class instruction. However, during class break and outside their classroom, the norm of speaking Putonghua is implicitly contested by Yunnan Mandarin, or Yunnan Putonghua, a non-standard Putonghua, which local Chinese teachers and students feel more comfortable and natural to communicate with. Regarding in-group interactions, a continuum of negotiations and contestations among the Burmese students with diverse linguistic backgrounds was observed. P13, one of the two Lisu students, reported his struggle to learn other languages over the past few years:

> It is complicated outside [home] and I have to strive hard to learn other languages every day … at junior high school. I have learned to understand Lashi and Lhaovo … [and] when I came to this senior high school, I learned how to speak Lashi.

In addition to learning Putonghua, P13 tried to learn other languages to interact with his peers from the same region, Panwa, where Lashi and Lhaovo are widely used. In his class, six students came from Panwa, and they formed peer communication styles by speaking Lashi and Lhaovo as in-group markers. Such internal language practices were contested and challenged by other ethnic Chinese students from Myanmar, who constituted over half of the transnational student population in this school, and who spoke Yunnan Mandarin as their mother tongue, like the local Chinese students at this school.

> We are just not used to it, because we have to speak Hanhua with them. (Interview with P5)

What P5 called Hanhua was Yunnan Mandarin, which is widely used by ethnic Chinese students from Myanmar. Ethnic Chinese usually speak Hanhua in Myanmar, so they are assumed to be Han people. They are the dominant Burmese ethnic group in China. P5 did not perceive Yunnan Mandarin as Putonghua, given her previous knowledge of speaking Putonghua as the lingua franca in mainland China. P5 used to feel comfortable when communicating with friends from Panwa in Lashi and Lhaovo, which were her mother tongues. However, when she started her study at this school, where the majority of her Burmese classmates were ethnic Chinese, she felt stressed because of the change in language practices. Her uncomfortable experience was confirmed by the monolingual speakers from Lweje:

> We are speaking Hanhua all the time, but they [students from Panwa] speak their own languages, so we feel very uncomfortable. When they behave like this, we immediately go away. (Focus group interview with P1, P2 and P3)

Monolingual speakers P1, P2, and P3 saw it as the norm to speak Yunnan Mandarin in peer communication, so speaking other languages was considered a problem. The way that they saw other languages was associated with their perception of these languages as minority languages, though they were from ethnic minorities of Han, Tai, Lhaovo, Lashi and Lisu in Myanmar.

> Sometimes when they speak their ethnic minority languages, I just look at them. … They speak like Buddha murmuring, and I can't understand anything. (Record of daily language used by P2)

However, when the students from Panwa spoke Yunnan Mandarin, ethnic Chinese students from Myanmar often laughed at their funny pronunciation, as reported by P3:

> When P11 speaks Hanyu [Chinese language], I couldn't help laughing.

Ethnic Chinese students from Myanmar seemed to enjoy their privilege of being legitimate speakers who could evaluate other minority students' language performance in Yunnan Mandarin. This was so even if their own Yunnan Mandarin did not successfully transfer to Putonghua, and they were not regarded as legitimate speakers of Chinese language by the local Chinese students. Such internal interactions between Burmese students with different linguistic backgrounds tend to reproduce hierarchies of exclusion. Those who speak Yunnan Mandarin as their mother tongue might find themselves positioned by Burmese peers as Chinese language authorities. Among Yunnan Mandarin speakers, however, ethnic Chinese students, because of their Han identity, consider themselves superior to Tai students in the Chinese ethnic hierarchy (Li et al., 2020). Despite their claims to authentic Chineseness, these ethnic Chinese students had problems with speaking Putonghua correctly. For example, none of them was able to distinguish between the dental sibilant 'z' and the retroflex 'zh' in Hanyu Pinyin (romanized text).

Despite being subjected to the norm of speaking Putonghua, ethnic Chinese students still possess advantages compared to other minority peers of Tai, Lhaovo, Lashi, and Lisu ethnicity. Due to their ethnic appearance and proficiency in Yunnan Mandarin, they easily passed as locals. However, there were frictions between the ethnic Chinese students who had been brought up in different linguistic and family backgrounds in Myanmar. A close look into their internal positionings reveals why monolingual speakers of Chinese became the local teachers' favored students, whereas ethnic Chinese students who were bilingual were marginalized, and their ancestry was frequently contested.

Indeed, monolingual speakers from Lweje were highly regarded and favoured by local Chinese teachers because of their Chinese language proficiency, academic performance, and their skills in playing basketball. For instance, the homeroom teacher highly praised P1's Chinese handwriting, which won P1 an opportunity to display his writing skill and compete with his Chinese peers in the school. P2's academic performance and qualities such as diligence and endurance were often favorably mentioned by his teachers. Similar to P1 and P2, P3's professional skills in playing basketball were valued, and he was given an opportunity to increase his visibility as a good player on campus. These Burmese students often took up positions of leadership in class. However, bilingual speakers of Chinese ethnicity from Myanmar did not seem to acknowledge their superior positions; they contested the monolingual students' identities of being good, legitimate Burmese students. In fact, the monolingual speakers' inability to speak Burmese was challenged by their bilingual peers from Myitkyina:

> We never see Lweje as part of Myanmar, because there they do not speak Burmese. (P19)

Apart from a lack of proficiency in the national language in Myanmar, the participants from Lweje were devalued because of their lower economic and social status compared to students from Myitkyina, which is between the capital city and a border town in the same state of Kachin:

> How the hell does someone from the small town of Lweje deserve to be the class monitor! (Quarrel between P21 and P1)

Such insults were uttered when P21 had a fight with P2, who was in charge of assigning cleaning tasks to the students, and who found that P21's group (four female students from Myitkyina) did not do their job properly. Later, P1 came to the rescue and tried to make peace, but he became involved in this quarrel until the homeroom teacher arrived.

Linguistically and economically, the students from Myitkyina considered themselves superior to the students from Lweje, because they spoke Burmese and usually came from wealthier families. The students from Lweje also referred to the gap:

> We used to have four male students from Myitkyina, and they often stayed together and talked rudely of us in Myanmar. Their families are rich, and at the beginning of this semester one of the students' father even directly deposited 4000 Yuan to his meal card. (Focus group interview with P1, P2 and P3)

However, being rich was not an accepted mark of superiority, as the majority of students were from rural areas. Indeed, showing off was despised and was seen as a problem instead of an advantage:

> Our personalities are not matched, because they often like to say 'I paid this much for this. I paid that much for that'. (Informal conversation with P5)

Despite their advantage in speaking Burmese, those bilingual ethnic Chinese were not acknowledged by their Chinese teachers who did not see their bilingual proficiency as an asset that contributed to the students' academic performance. As ethnic Chinese, they were expected to display their ancestral identities by only speaking Chinese, and by fully conforming to the school's codes of conduct in language and social behaviour. Because of the discrepancies in their previous linguistic and educational practices and the school's monolingual rules, speaking Burmese created tensions between their imposed Chinese identity and their self-positioning. What further complicated their Chinese identities was their previous exposure to the Taiwanese educational system. For instance, their use of traditional Chinese characters was often diagnosed as a problem, as described by P20. Indeed, these bilingual ethnic Chinese who could speak both Burmese and Chinese, and who were economically advantaged, did not find themselves empowered at this school; their language and cultural advantages turned out to conflict with the limited identities imposed by the school and their local Chinese teachers.

Regarding within-group language practices, Lisu students were the most marginalized group, because they had to learn others' languages for daily communication with their friends from the same region, Panwa, and with other Myanmar students from Lweje and Myitkyina. Lashi and Lhaovo were the local lingua franca for those migrating from Panwa, so speaking Lashi and Lhaovo became the in-group communication style

among students from Panwa, but such language practices were challenged by the Burmese students who spoke Yunnan Mandarin. Students who spoke Yunnan Mandarin as their mother tongue constituted the majority group; however, among the Yunnan Mandarin speakers, there were different positionings. Burmese students who spoke Yunnan Mandarin as their mother tongue but who registered themselves as Tai were perceived as inferior to the ethnic Chinese, who spoke Yunnan Mandarin and who had 'Han blood ties'. The superiority of being Han made ethnic Chinese the most visible of the Burmese students, and their linguistic and ethnic background allowed them to position themselves as superior to other Burmese students. However, when it comes to speaking standard Putonghua, ethnic Chinese are contested as authentic speakers of Chinese because of their previous exposure to the Taiwanese educational system and their problems with pronouncing Putonghua correctly.

Agentive practices in navigating marginalization and (re)positioning themselves

Confronted with external, exclusionary microagressions and internal social and cultural hierarchies and contradictions, these participants mobilized their linguistic and cultural resources to empower their transnational learning. They also used globally accepted cultural activities to help them reposition in their lived space. The primary strategy was to learn Putonghua. However, at this school, these participants could not get access to Putonghua for various reasons. The primary reason was that they were physically separated from local Chinese peers due to their ineligibility to sit *Gaokao*, a National College Entrance Examination in China, as the policy does not allow transnational students to sit the examination. Another possible reason is that local Chinese students usually do not speak Putonghua; instead, Yunnan Mandarin is a lingua franca for local Chinese students' daily communication.

To improve their Putonghua, these participants turned to online resources to make friends with local Chinese people, to acquire knowledge of Hanyu Pinyin, and to expand their knowledge of China and Chinese society. In interviews with these participants, almost all of them indicated that their Putonghua had improved and their 'social network' had expanded after migrating to China:

> After I learned how to use WeChat [a Chinese social network software], my social network has widened so much that I can communicate with the people all over the world and my Putonghua has also progressed. Before coming to China, I did not know how to use Pinyin to type Chinese words, but now I can immediately figure out the spelling for each word. (P19)

However, learning how to type Pinyin on a smartphone or other devices is different from learning to spell Pinyin correctly. For instance, one of the predominant digital input forms is Sogou Pinyin, which is similar to an auto-correct or an auto-complete function, and it does not require a good command of spelling; users do not need to know how to write a Chinese character correctly and still can simply input the initial letter and will be offered character options to choose from. Thus, their gains of learning Pinyin spelling by using Sogou Pinyin are questionable.

Also, when asked with whom they often chose to speak, they said that they preferred to add two types of friends in their WeChat list: non-Yunnanese in China and ethnic Chinese in Myanmar. One of the participants reported her experiences of making online friends with people outside Yunnan province:

> In my WeChat, all my Chinese friends are from other provinces. I don't add any friends from this border high school. I don't know why; I just don't like talking to them. (P5)

Like P5, the female participants seemed to have many Chinese friends in their WeChat list. When asked what they were talking about or how much they were exposed to Chinese society via WeChat, it seemed that their communication with Chinese online friends, mostly males, remained at a superficial level. Indeed, they had to block some of their male online friends who flirted with them too much.

Instead of communicating with Chinese online friends, most participants spent time on online linguistic resources. For example, they picked up popular Chinese expressions used online such as '*ni dongge maoxian'* (you do not understand it at all), '*wo yeshi zuile'* (I do not want to say anything), and '*diaosi*' (nobody), etc. These informal Chinese online expressions were copied and used in their WeChat conversations with Burmese peers, and sometimes such language input was transferred to their daily oral communication with families at home when they went back to Myanmar on holiday. Mostly, their families were shocked at their online slang and questioned their study in China:

> When I go back home [Myanmar], I often unconsciously speak Chinese like this. My family says 'what on earth have you learned in China?' (P21)

It seems that technology has helped these participants to construct multiple identities that transcend geographic locations and national boundaries. Yet it is questionable whether these interactions will improve their Putonghua, since their online friends have diverse motivations for making friends with them; also, online linguistic resources like the online slang expressions are not necessarily valued in the norms of Putonghua.

Linguistically, the participants used their learning of English to help them to reposition themselves. They attached great importance to learning English, but most of them did not seem to be attentive in English class, partly because the textbook used is examination-oriented, and partly because they lacked faith in local Chinese English teachers, whose proficiency was sometimes questioned by them.

> Here, learning English simply means doing multiple choices of A, B, C, and D. It's for passing examinations, so I feel that I haven't learned much. (Informal conversation with P15)

> Our teacher's English is not good, and her pronunciation has a Chinese flavour. For example, she pronounces [t] as [tə:], [meik] as [meikə:] with a Chinese accent. Sometimes her pronunciation is wrong. … In Myanmar, we started to learn English when we were young; at my senior high school, all subjects except Burmese are taught in English. (Interview with P17)

Given their previous educational backgrounds in Myanmar public schools where English is the medium of instruction from senior high school and above, the bilingual ethnic Chinese students who had finished their high school study often felt more privileged than other Burmese students and even than their Chinese teachers, whose English pronunciation they perceived as deficient. Due to their lack of confidence in local English teachers and examination-oriented textbooks, some participants sought help from other sources by purchasing supplemental materials from Myanmar, which they considered more useful for learning English by themselves. While learning English with supplemental materials, these participants helped each other and kept learning Myanmar and Chinese. For example, P15's Chinese was better than P17's, but her Myanmar was not as good as P17's; so, P15 taught P17 Chinese by writing up the translation of the meaning next to the Burmese denotations. P17, in turn, helped P15 to improve her Burmese because she grew up with Burman nannies. They made use of their linguistic resources to support each other's learning of English, Burmese, and Chinese.

These participants also used global cultural consumption to (re)position themselves. Though they came from a peripheral region in Myanmar, they were exposed to global cultural practices such as going to church, watching Hollywood movies, and playing online computer games. Engaging in these forms of consumption, which were not necessarily valued at their school, was another way for them to exert their agency in efforts to overcome their marginalised positions. Active engagement in global cultural consumption is particularly relevant for participants with non-Chinese ethnic backgrounds. For instance, all the participants from Panwa, as members of the people from Kachin, were raised in Christian families and had experience of going to church with their parents from a young age. Also, they were taught to read the Jingpho language through Bible study. Although they spoke different languages such as Lashi, Lhaovo and Lisu, these students were united by a common religion (Christianity) and language (Jingpo). Their attachment to their religion provided them with a space to contest their marginalised identities. Their religious practices were acknowledged and recognised by the school, which granted them a one-day holiday at Christmas while the rest of the school had normal lessons. For instance, when P10 showed the first researcher her photos, she was particularly proud of her hometown with its 'European style' buildings:

> The church buildings are the most beautiful in our hometown. They are tall and look like European buildings. (Informal conversation with P10)

The participants from Panwa developed their global connections through watching Hollywood movies and listening to popular English songs, in strong contrast to their ethnic Chinese peers, who followed Chinese soap operas and celebrities.

> I only like watching Hollywood movies. … I don't like watching Myanmar movies because it doesn't look good when Burman people squat to eat. (Interview with P9)

P9 not only identified herself with western culture but distanced herself from being part of Myanmar. Her description of typical Burmese dining culture seemed to show a distinct identity with the Jingpo-related group, which had been in long conflict with the Myanmar armed forces (Walton, 2013).

These participants tried to hide what was perceived as their 'undesirable' identities. Given that the majority looked like average Chinese people and spoke Yunnan Mandarin as their mother tongue, one way for them to fit in was to downplay any Myanmar aspects of their identities. Exertion of their agency by hiding less desirable identities could be observed in their everyday sports (playing *chinlone*), dress (wearing *Longyi*), and their script choice (traditional Chinese characters). For example, after having been exposed to Taiwan textbooks in Myitkyina, some participants, like P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, and P21, learned how to read and write traditional Chinese characters. Yet, to pass examinations and avoid being criticised by local Chinese teachers, they adopted simplified Chinese characters for schoolwork.

> Here, our teachers do not allow us to write [traditional Chinese characters]. If we write it, they will not be happy, and they hope that we will not write it next time. (P20)

Though these participants used their agentive strategies in different ways, they shared the desire to improve Putonghua and make friends with local Chinese nationals. For instance, the bilingual and multilingual speakers liked to use their home language(s) to help them to read Chinese, because they lacked knowledge of Hanyu Pinyin and proficiency in pronouncing Chinese words correctly. A more observable strategy adopted by almost every participant was the use of online resources that transcended geographical and national boundaries, though it remained unclear whether they were effectively improving their Putonghua via online resources; indeed, their exposure to online reading resources contributed little to improving their use of Putonghua, for reasons explained above.

These participants' dependence on using online resources points to the discontinuities that characterize the speaking of Putonghua at the border. At this school, these students faced the challenge of speaking Putonghua, while the Chinese teachers preferred to use Yunnan Mandarin to communicate with them. Similarly, Chinese students used Yunnan (non-standard) Mandarin for daily communication, except when having lessons in class. Burmese students, who had had difficulties with Hanyu Pinyin and reading Putonghua in Myanmar, were still confronted with the same problem after migrating to China, and their Putonghua proficiency had not improved much after their migration to China's border. In other words, the imposition of Putonghua presents a challenge to both Chinese and Burmese border people.

Reflections and conclusion

These participants experienced different levels of exclusionary microaggression in this border high school; they also experienced complicated internal contradictions due to

different language use and self-positioning. The dominant factors that intersected with their exclusion and differentiation were class, ethnicity, and language, which had compounding effects in the marginalization of these transnational students' lived experiences. Sometimes, they were ignored by their local Chinese peers, who saw themselves as superior, and who negatively stereotyped these students as racially inferior. The stereotyping of Myanmar students' lived practices reflects the findings of previous studies regarding transnational students traveling from an undeveloped to a developed country (Hatoss et al., 2012; Simpson and Cooke, 2009), from a peripheral to a semi-peripheral region (Takenoshita et al., 2014), and from a rural to an urban area (Dong, 2009; Lan, 2014).

However, what is intriguing in this study is that some participants (P15 and P16) from the capital city of Kachin state were actually from better-off and more urban backgrounds than some of their local Chinese peers, which makes this study different from the existing literature. Though many participants spoke Yunnan Mandarin as their mother tongue, local Chinese students still avoided communicating with them in either Putonghua or Yunnan Mandarin. Their refusal to communicate is partly because local Chinese students perceived Burmese students as linguistic others with certain expected language problems (Piller, 2011) and partly because they did not think Myanmar students were worth cultivating friendships with.

China is one of the emerging transnational study destinations, and there are challenges for education practitioners who face transnational students with various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In Chinese educational contexts such as this study, Putonghua is considered a global language to embrace transnational diversity. It appears that what has been overlooked in this border high school's education practices are considerations of social justice and equity. Policy-makers and administrators need to accommodate the linguistic and cultural diversity of the border people, and address education practices that recognize global citizenship (Patterson and Choi, 2018). Given the increasing visibility of Burmese students in this school, as well as students from other countries and regions studying at Chinese schools as well as universities, the centralized, formal schooling system should be adjusted to accommodate with more localized evaluation systems that consider border realities and transnational students' diverse needs. The one-size-fits-all approach widens the educational gap between peripheral regions and the national centre and should be replaced with inclusive and context-specific schooling policies and pedagogy.

Teachers involved in transnational education practices need to be trained to assist transnational students to develop their transnational identities. Rather than disciplining them into a homogenous group and insisting on standardized assessment, teachers should be aware of their previous learning trajectories and adopt sensitive approaches to bridging transnational students' needs and helping them to achieve meaningful learning. Specifically, teachers should have a vision of cultivating students' multilingual competence and helping them to build up flexible identities so that they

are prepared to fulfil their potential for transnational success. There will inevitably be hesitation and negotiations among monolingual teachers, which calls for transnational education practitioners to provide an open and democratic setting for students to perceive others dialogically; after all, ‘a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched’ (Bakhtin, 1986: 7).

Ideally, a venue for transnational education practices should be an ‘in-between space’ (Bhabha, 2004). In such a transnational educational space, there is something volatile, dynamic, and unpredictable when cultures meet at a contact zone. Bhabha (1990) explains that this is to be expected, because the specificities of cultures cannot be assumed to co-exist harmoniously, on the assumption that differences, disjunctures, ruptures, and incompatibility of cultures do not matter. However, such spaces do not imply a complete eradication of difference/s; instead, they generate something new, and allow for the articulation of difference/s. To provide a dialogical space will considerably push the development of transnational education practice as well as help students, including transnational students and local students, to eliminate the potential conflicts brought by class, ethnicity, culture, and language, and help them to construct global citizenship, which should be the primary obligation for transnational education providers in China as well as in other parts of the world.

Limitations and future research

This study mainly focuses on the transnational students’ voices, and the voices of their teachers, school managers, and other stakeholders are not presented. More empirical studies from different perspectives are to be expected in the future. While the scope of the paper limits its generalisability, detail and situational depth are provided by the case study method and the ethnomethodological approach. The increasing number of transnational students from other neighboring countries may become a direction for future research into how the role of language and other social forces shape and reshape transnational trajectories and social mobility of transnational students coming to China for their transnational aspirations. These leave much room for future research.

Author’s note

We understand that use/choice of language(s) and identity positionings are complicated, and it is connected to ideologies and political stands; however, this paper focuses more on the participants’ language use. We as scholars try to avoid being involved in political disputes, although our efforts may not be effective. There still might be politically contestable expressions in this paper, but this paper has presented these students’ authentic voices. We believe that the paper is meaningful for Myanmar and the people there, including those ethnicities, on that land.

Bionote

Jia Li, PhD, is Associate Professor in the School of Foreign Languages, Yunnan University, Kunming, China. She obtained her PhD degree from the Department of

Linguistics, Macquarie University, Australia, in 2017. Her research interests focus on identity in education, language policy, and multilingual studies. Email: jia_li_yunnan@qq.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3391-5720

Bin Ai, PhD, is Associate Professor in the School of Foreign Studies, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai, China. He obtained his PhD degree from the School of Education, Deakin University, Australia, in 2014. His recent research interests focus on sociology of education, multilingualism research, and sociolinguistics. Email: adamaib@outlook.com
Corresponding author, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7952-8390

Cora Lingling Xu, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the School of Education, Durham University, Durham, UK. She received her PhD in Sociology of Education from the University of Cambridge in 2016, as a Cambridge Trust scholar. Her research interests include Bourdieu's theory of practice, migration, education mobilities, and transnational education. Email: lingling.xu@durham.ac.uk
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3895-3934

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