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Taiwanese Students in Malaysia and Interculturality: When National Identities Take Primacy over Individualities

Abstract Using a liquid approach, the authors analyze the intercultural discourse of Taiwanese students who had taken part in a short term exchange program with a Malaysian university. The four participants were graduating in Mandarin Chinese in their home institution and were following a Chinese program in multilingual Malaysia. Data were collected through focus groups held in Mandarin Chinese and focused on their experience in the host country. The authors analyze how participants talk about themselves, Malaysians, and their adaptation to the host country. The processes of essentialization and othering that occur and put in contrast the host and the home contexts are similar to those held in Asia-to-Europe mobility and very far from an “interculturality without culture” (Dervin, 2010). If we focus on the construction of discourses, this Asia-to-Asia mobility forces us to relativize the opposition of cultures as an explanation for difficulties encountered by mobile students.

Keywords interculturality, othering, cultural adjustment, student exchange, Taiwanese students

Introduction

Chinese students abroad have become the topic of a plethora of scientific literature. Researchers focus on the financial impact, on resistance in the host

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country, on the involvement in “mutual learning” and “mutual enrichment,” on the social consequences for the work market or on Chinese as the “reference group” of international students (Henze & Zhu, 2012, p. 91). Yet, contributions often fail to define the Chinese student: Are they talking about the citizenship or the “ethnic” Chinese student (including for example Chinese Malaysians or Singaporeans in the study)?

The study of Chinese students abroad offers a particular advantage. In many countries around the world, they constitute an important percentage of international students: 9.8% of the foreign enrolment in French universities, 12.1% in Finland, 18% in UK, 28.4% in the USA and 35.2% in Australia in 2012 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). It is thus easy to obtain a minimum number of participants in any particular country, region or even within a single university and comparisons between different learning contexts (Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2008) would similarly be possible.

Some articles address the particularity of the Chinese student in China (Bodycott & Walker, 2000; Bouvier, 2002), but most contributions focus on the experience of Chinese students in “Western” countries: UK (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Gu & Maley, 2008; Gu, 2009), USA (Lee, 2010), Australia (Smith, 2001; Wong, 2004), New Zealand (Holmes, 2004; Zhang & Brunton, 2007) or Germany (Guan, 2010; Sun, 2010). Studies sometimes cover a larger Western geographical territory like Europe (Shen, 2006) or a larger Chinese migrant population (Ma & Cartier, 2003; Xie, 2008). Most contributions are “emblematic of the current interests in ‘otherness’ but also of the (over) emphasis on difference and culture in education” (Dervin, 2011a, p. 42), portraying the Chinese student as a radically different *other* and explicitly or implicitly insisting on the Confucian heritage culture of the students in opposition to the culture of the host country. Authors insist on the supposedly connected difficulties of interaction between both populations and in many cases when the Erasmus program is not involved in the research, the Chinese student has become a euphemism for the mobile or international non-Western student.

On the other hand, Chinese students in Asia generate fewer contributions, although Japan (Jou & Fukada, 1995), Hong Kong/Macau of China (Lam, 2006; Li & Bray, 2007), and Singapore (Tsang, 2001; Rajaram & Bordia, 2013) have become the terrains of a few articles. Welch (2011) deals with Southeast Asia in general. However East Asia and Southeast Asia entertain close ties with China,

either because they have been Sinicized at some time in their history (Korea and Vietnam), share a similar cultural background (Japan) or because they were the destinations of the first Chinese diasporas like Malaysia and Singapore (Bruneau, 2001). This may be seen as a facilitating factor of adaptation for mobile Chinese students often lacking proficiency in foreign languages (Henze & Zhu, 2012). Studies in these contexts are lacking, probably because they would not offer evidences of “culture shock” (Oberg, 1954, August, 1960). This concept has been widely used to describe Chinese students’ experiences, and perpetuates a total opposition between collective (Eastern) and individualistic (Western) societies (Holliday, 2011, p. 9).

The Malaysian context offers an interesting alternative to the “West.” With more than 10,000 individuals registered in Malaysian public and private higher institutions in 2010, Chinese students represent 11.8% of international enrolment, in second position after Iran (13.6%) and before Indonesia (11.4%). Malaysia’s ethnic Chinese minority totals 21% of the country’s population and even if most of them are native speakers of a lesser spoken variety of Chinese (Cantonese and Hokkien being the major ones), more than 90% of them study in Chinese schools where the medium of instruction is Mandarin, thus contributing to the proliferation of this language in Malaysia (Wang, 2012). Besides Malay which is the sole national language, English is widely spoken and 25% of urban Malaysians use it on a daily basis (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

In this article, we examine how four Taiwanese students who were spending one semester in Malaysia relate their interactions with the local people. We look at their adaptation to the local situation and see if it is different from Western situations. Focusing on discourse analysis, the question is *how* participants talk rather than *what* they say (Dervin, 2013) about themselves and about Malaysians. Before analyzing the data, we define what we understand by “intercultural” as the term is widely used but carries different interpretations. We will also discuss the literature on Chinese students and show how far their representation is from the post-modern acceptance of the term *interculturality*.

Defining Interculturality

The concept of *interculturality* is quite problematic as two radically opposed acceptations of the term are frequently used in academic contributions. The first

approach puts in contrast two cultures or their representatives, which we will call here “solid interculturality” (Dervin, 2011b), while the second insists on the interrelational aspect, on the co-construction of identity which is thus not perceived as stable and is the result of a liquid (Bauman, 2001) process, or *identification* (Dervin, 2013; Machart & Lim, 2013).

The “solid” approach essentializes individuals in their supposed racial/ethnic/national identities. They become mere representatives of a “cultural construct” where culture may be easily replaced by race or ethnicity (Lavanchy, Gajardo, & Dervin, 2011; Dervin, 2013; Machart & Lim, 2013). Often associated with a particular phenotype, they are expected to behave and to speak according to their “ethnicity” (Fought, 2006). Individuals are denied any individualism but become the objects of stereotypes and social representations. Research in the field clearly shows that the apprehension of a particular category leads to an opposition of *us* vs. *them* (Poutignat & Streiff-Fenart, 2008) and subsequently discrimination (Lacassagne, Salès-Wuillemin, Castel, & Jébrane, 2001). The “solid” approach to culture finally leads to power relations: One (usually the Westerner) appears as the winner, and the other as the loser: “...this perception of difference is a Centre, Western, chauvinistic ideology of superiority” (Holliday, 2011, p. ix).

This approach is based on a static definition of culture, which is usually perceived as a collection of stable criteria (e.g., Argenter, 2000) and it circulates widely in certain academic circles. It is however now commonly accepted among cultural anthropologists that cultures do not exist *per se* (Gajardo, Dervin, & Lavanchy, 2011) and that the term ethnic/cultural relations should be favored in order to insist on the co-construction of identity (Machart & Lim, 2013). Identification processes are situated within the communication context; only the co-constructivist approach can restore the subject as the core of the discourse and enable the researcher to move away from his/her objectivation (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1997, 1999). Individuals may decide to adhere, distance, subvert (Fought, 2006, p. 17) or simply ignore commonly spread representations of her/his “cultural belonging.” Researchers now plea for a fluid approach to discourse (Holliday, 2011; Abdallah-Pretceille, 2012; Dervin, 2013) that refrains from using “the illusion of cultural identity” (Bayart, 2005).

In an address in a seminar on intercultural studies held in Lille (France) in April 2013, the French scholar Martine Abdallah-Pretceille claimed that the two

positions (i.e., solid vs. liquid approach) are incompatible and that adoption of one necessarily implies the rejection of the other. Some researchers claim to reject any essentializing and stereotyping but yet refer to homogeneous groups, a position that Dervin (2011b) labels as Janusian after the Roman two-faced god looking at two opposite directions.

To avoid any ambiguity regarding the term *intercultural*, Abdallah-Pretceille (2005, 2012) suggests talking about “un humanisme du divers,” a “humanism of the diverse” (which, she claims, is convenient because it enables the researcher to move away from the concept of culture). This leads to an “intercultural without culture” (Dervin, 2011b) and “multiculturalism without culture” (Phillips, 2007). The authors of this article definitively adopt a co-constructivist approach, positioning themselves in the wake of fluid interculturality. They consider that the personality of the interviewer(s) needs to be taken into consideration in the analysis of the data, that the context plays a significant role in the interactions with participants and that they must look at *how* interlocutors are identified.

The Chinese Students Abroad

The use of the definite article is here justified by the fact that in most contributions, Chinese students are homogenized, standardized and that very little place is given to individual personalities, choices or intersubjective identification. Dervin (2011a) cites for example a study on students of Shenzhen, China. This contribution reduces the studied population to “only” nine million individuals which are supposed to be homogeneous. Dervin shows how the solid approach is quasi-systematically used when discussing the difficulties encountered by Chinese students (p. 45), a critique which is also shared by Clark and Gieve (2006) who regret the use of a “shared Confucian cultural heritage” to explain “consistent Chinese behaviors in Western classrooms” (p. 54).

The representations of the Chinese abroad echo descriptions of scholars who worked in a Chinese environment. Bodycott and Walker (2000) relate their own experience in Hong Kong, analyzing the difficulties they encountered through common Confucian heritage culture criteria like power distance. In her studies on Chinese learners of French in China, Bouvier (2002) opposes Chinese and French teachers on several criteria where the former appear as traditional, Confucian and the later as more modern and ready to communicate. She pleads

for foreign lecturers to take into consideration cultural differences. On doing so, Bouvier makes all learners representatives of one culture which is presented as one homogeneous culture and adopts a solid stand reinforcing the idea of “merely swapping cultures” (Dervin, 2011a, p. 39).

Confucian heritage culture is characterized by students’ passivity, lack of critical thinking, memorization strategies, and unwillingness to participate in classroom talk, etc. (Clark & Gieve, 2006). Outside the classroom, Confucian students are said to be collectivist, remain among themselves, preserve harmony (Wei & Li, 2013) and have few interactions with “other groups,” etc. These characteristics seem to be brought along by the Chinese wherever they settle down, creating the impression that these characteristics are embodied in the individuals themselves and are expressed similarly and independently of the host country: Australia, UK, USA, France or Germany. This systematic opposition is called upon to explain Chinese difficulties to adapt to the host country particularly in two important fields of their experience abroad, e.g. adjustment in the classroom and communication with the locals: “A large amount of research has been done investigating the adjustment, adaptation or acculturation of international students studying abroad” (Henze & Zhu, 2012, p. 96).

The concept of Confucian heritage culture appears as a smoke screen to justify a claim for difference. In a contribution challenging the use of Confucianism to explain (Asian) students’ behavior, Shi (2006) questions the representation of Confucianism. Going back to *The Analects of Confucius*, she claims that personal initiative, joy in learning, critical thinking and real life experiences are parts of the Confucian project which contradict the characteristics (textbooks, being a serious student, teacher domination, etc.) that are often put forward by scholars referring to Confucian heritage culture. Confucian heritage culture appears thus as a social construct, whose meaning has deviated from the original text and which is used as “an alibi” (Dervin, 2008) to explain behaviors.

Henze and Zhu (2012), referring to academic contributions written prior to the Chinese education rush, mention a list of difficulties encountered by international students independent of their origin: “(1) as a foreigner living in an unfamiliar environment; (2) being a university student facing unfamiliar demands; (3) as an adolescent encountering the problems of becoming and being an adult; (4) being a representative of one’s home country” (Bochner as cited in Henze & Zhu, p. 96). Of the four criteria, the last one has become interestingly the sole angle

under which Chinese students are studied.

Taiwanese Students in International Interactions

Studies on Taiwanese students abroad follow a similar trend: The stress is put on the Confucian heritage and supposed shared values, even if differences between the socio-political Taiwanese and Chinese Mainland contexts are mentioned: “Although there are sociopolitical and historical differences, Chinese international students from Chinese Mainland and Taiwan share the same cultural heritage (e.g., Confucian values pertaining to modesty, relationships, and collectivism; Taoist values of harmony with reality; same spoken language, Mandarin)” (Wang et al., 2012, p. 424).

Among the factors influencing the interactions with the host society, the most recent ones (i.e., socio-political and historical) are easily overlooked to underline the Confucian connection in an attempt to stress the similar behavior between Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese (e.g., Lai, To, Lung, & Lai, 2012, p. 277). If this tendency was true, it would enable Taiwanese students moving to Southeast Asia to have an easier connection with “fellow Confucian” interlocutors, such as Chinese Malaysians.

A study by Chen and Ching (2012) tries to move beyond culturalism and suggests that “individual perspective” and “cross-cultural flexibility” are key factors to successful interactions with international students on Taiwanese campuses. The authors suggest that “EFL students in Taiwan should be exposed to more cross-cultural opportunities, in order to enhance their cross-cultural competencies” (p. 3). Fan and Feng (2012, June) note that 78.6% of Taiwanese students seeking an overseas internship opt for Australia or the USA because of English (p. 285). They reinforce the East/West dichotomy (Taiwanese vs. international English-speaking interlocutors) and assume that “cross-cultural” experiences occur only in English. “Moving West” has become a synonym of internationalization.

Taiwanese students’ interactions abroad are most of the time seen through the lenses of cultural differences. Ying (2002) relates a study on Taiwanese students in the USA and notes that former studies highlighted a “significant cultural distance” (p. 46). She concludes that “[a] positive attitude toward friendship formation with Americans reflects a desire to know Americans better and to

expand their social world, while a positive attitude toward friendship formation with co-ethnics likely reflects a wish for retaining a connection to the home culture” (p. 52). She fails to describe the American society and campuses as drastically heterogeneous and increasingly more international. Jian, Sandnes, Huang, & Hagen (2010) note that it is important that students and teachers move away from respective cultural misconception of Asians/Westerners (in this case Taiwanese/Norwegians) and adopt a similar treatment of all students, regardless of their origin.

Confucian Heritage Culture: Malaysia in, Malaysia out

The population of Malaysia is ethnically and linguistically diverse and is estimated to be 28.6 million in 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, n.d.). The relationship of Malaysians to Confucian heritage culture is either automatically implied or questioned.

A study by Joseph Wong (2004) on Asian students who were studying in Australia is particularly significant. The author attempts to explain how students who have been educated in a “foreign culture” adapt to the Australian context and raises the question of the context of learning vs. the cultural background of the participants. Respondents are originally from Chinese Mainland, and Taiwan province, Vietnam as well as from Malaysia. The national context is never taken into consideration, which may be surprising when one wants to take into consideration the “cultural” background. The history, the GDP vary from one country to another and Vietnam only opened in the 90’s whereas Malaysia has always been attached to the capitalist world. When referring to culturalist literature, China would belong to the “Sinic civilization” while Malaysia would congregate with the Muslim world (Huntington, 1996). A closer look at the ethnic composition of the country would indicate three major ethnic groups: Bumiputras (Malays and other autochthonous groups), Chinese, and Indians (Department of Statistics Malaysia, n.d.) who mainly migrated to Malaya under British colonial rule (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). However, the ethnicity of the participants in this study is not mentioned. If one wants to be consistent when taking into consideration the cultural background of the participants, then one must definitively differentiate the respondents according to their national and ethnic background. The impression given here is that all Asians, notwithstanding

their origins, are similar. We witness here a homogenization of Asian participants, an essentialization going beyond national borders.

Another study by Swee Noi Smith (2001) compares “three Chinese national groups” (i.e., from Chinese Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia) and their relation to Confucian heritage culture. The idea of associating Chinese Malaysians (and Singaporeans) whose ancestors migrated to Malaya mainly in the 19th century with Confucian heritage culture, or rather Chinese culture is characteristic of a “culturespeak” (Hannerz, 1999) or the common use of culture in any circumstance, with here a quest for Chinese lineage overruling personal (and national) experiences. Even if Chinese Malaysians may identify themselves as Chinese, it needs to be situated in the Malaysian context, i.e., as an opposition of Malay/Chinese/Indian rather than on a historical relation to Chinese Mainland from which many Chinese have distanced themselves by the time of the independence of Malaya (Wang as cited in Suryadinata, 2007; Lim, 2013). Smith obtained opposing results from her consistent analysis using culturalist principles which are based on Hofstede’s decried theories. Even if Singaporeans and Malaysians scored similar results on the syllabus-bound scale, Smith underlined gender differences in an attempt to show an opposition between both nations, convinced that Singaporeans should be more influenced by Confucian heritage culture as they live in a comparatively more Chinese environment, while admitting the limited number of her Singaporean participants. The paper definitively shows the use of culturalist lenses, Smith tried to include Chinese Malaysians in the Confucian heritage culture student group and applied a national filter at the same time, ignoring for example the local diversity and essentializing Chinese Malaysians in a historical, Confucian, national-oriented identity.

These contributions derive from an opposition of Confucian heritage culture/Western contexts in which both groups (Chinese and Westerners) are essentialized. We will now look at situations when so-called Confucian heritage culture students move to a country with supposedly Confucian heritage culture tradition or a large Confucian heritage culture community, depending on literature. Chinese Malaysians represent the biggest ethnic Chinese community with 6.43 million individuals in 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, n.d.) and the second highest concentration (22.4%) after Singapore outside China (Haley, Haley, & Tan, 2009).

Design of the Research

The participants were four Taiwanese exchange students: one male, Wen, and three females, Li, Mei, and Jun¹. Aged between 19 and 20 years old, they were graduating in Chinese studies at the home institution and they were registered for one semester in a Malaysian university in the suburb of the capital, where they were following BA Mandarin courses. The students of the Malaysian program are ethnic Chinese Malaysian citizens who have been schooled in a Malaysian national school in which Mandarin was the medium of instruction at primary level. A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) has been signed between the two partner universities; and the first Malaysian exchange students have already returned from Taiwan. The participants in this study were the first Taiwanese students to come to Malaysia under this MOA. Interviews were conducted at the end of the semester, two weeks before their return to Taiwan.

The original project comprised two parts. During the first interaction, two Taiwanese students were asked to interact with a Malaysian Mandarin-speaking research assistant. The conversation focused on the Taiwanese students' preparation for the exchange and was conducted in Mandarin Chinese. In the second part of the data collection, an international researcher (European, non-Chinese speaker) was supposed to lead the discussion. However, after the first two exchanges, it was noted that the Taiwanese participants were not able (or not willing) to communicate in English and it was decided that the assistance of the Chinese-speaking research assistant was needed. The topics for discussion included: representations of Malaysia before arrival in the country, arrival and adaptation, daily life on/around the campus and study, and projection of return to the home country (cf. Appendix). This procedure was repeated a second time with the other two Taiwanese participants. Each group discussion lasted for approximately 30 minutes. All data were thus collected in Chinese, then transcribed and translated into English.

The data analysis will focus on the representation of interculturality by these four participants. To analyze the data, we will look at the use of *deictics* or shifters in the interactions. Shifters are the most important linguistic tools in conversation analysis because they refer to the communicative situation (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1999, p. 62). Researchers working in the field of

¹ Names have been changed.

énonciation or enunciation give shifters a big emphasis in their analysis. In this article, we will particularly focus on *here* vs. *there* and *I/we* vs. *they* which are highly significant in the process of “othering” (Dervin, 2013) and stereotyping. These shifters are symptomatic of the categorization of ethnic groups opposing a constructed *self* to an *other*, reinforcing the dichotomy *us* vs. *them* (Poutignat & Streiff-Fenart, 2008).

We will also look at traces of “mixed intersubjectivity,” looking at different voices rather than the speaker’s present in the discourse: “identifiable others,” “unidentifiable others,” “‘real’ interlocutors,” “self/selves” and “hidden self/selves” (Dervin, 2013, p. 18). This should help us understand the positioning of the speaker:

After having identified these voices [...], it is important to propose some hypotheses as to what impact these voices have in terms of strategies and identification. This is what I call *Mixed Intersubjectivity* (MIN): the fact that interlocutors “play” with different voices (their own and others’), goes well beyond what appears at the surface of discourse. (Dervin, 2013, p. 18)

Results and Discussion

The Struggles for Relations with Locals

One of the expectations of exchange students is to develop contacts with locals and many Chinese students in the West complain about their lack of interactions with people other than their co-nationals (Henze & Zhu, 2012). Language is often the reason because the students are most of the time not native speakers of the languages they may use in the place. This was mentioned in Finland where international students do not master Finnish or Swedish and thus remain among international students, building “cocoon communities” (Dervin, 2011c). Likewise, Chinese students lack proficiency in English or the languages used in the host country (Henze & Zhu, 2012) or at least that is the way they feel.

The representation of communication with Malaysians enters this framework as Mei’s utterances show:

Excerpt 1:

Mei: If a Malay speaks to me, *it’s impossible* not to answer him, but I do not understand

everything that he says, then it will end up like the chicken talking to the duck, and *it'll be very funny*.

Excerpt 2:

Interviewer: If you are in a situation like you said earlier, a chicken talking to the duck. How would you handle it?

Li: Yes, if there are Chinese nearby...

Mei: ... ask them over to help.

Excerpt 1, though short, is indeed revealing, informing us about Mei's representations of intercultural communication. She has chosen, among all possibilities, communication with a Malay to talk about her interactions during the four months she has been spending in Malaysia. Mei is registered in a program in which courses are taught in Mandarin by ethnic Chinese lecturers and are attended exclusively by Malaysian Mandarin speakers. She stays in an apartment that she shares with fellow Taiwanese classmates, in a condominium on the outskirts of the campus where most units are rented by international students (mainly Middle Eastern and Chinese). Her "cocoon communities" (Dervin, 2011c) revolve around 1/ international students and 2/ Chinese speakers, partially overlapping (international Chinese speakers, at least fellow Taiwanese students). The chances that Mei has to interact with a Malay, especially with a Malay person who would not speak English², are slim (she recognizes later in the discussion that she rarely has interactions with non-Chinese people).

When she says she would not understand him, she is implying that he would be monolingual, thus eliminating the possibility of multilingual abilities of the person she encounters. She also automatically associates the individual with an ethnicity and a (single) language, a feature which is common in discourses on identity (Kramsch, 1998), and also restrains herself from having an interaction with this imagined Malay that the use of English or other communicative strategies would have enabled her to have. The monolingualistic ideology not only fails to match the actual situation, but also restrains her from engaging in intercultural communications.

In Excerpt 2, Mei (and Li) sees a solution to this kind of situation by asking a Chinese person to help. She does not mention if it is an international student like

² English is taught in Malaysia from primary school.

herself or a local ethnic Chinese, but to be consistent with her first statement, we assume that she is referring to the latter, who would be able to speak in Malay. The difference between both excerpts is due to the structure of the discussion in which participants relate their experience following a chronological order. Mei has gained experience and can think of other strategies to communicate with the locals after four months in Malaysia.

The metaphor of the chicken and the duck is particularly interesting because it essentializes two supposedly linguistically diverse individuals in two biologically different categories. Mei and “the Malay” belong to two different categories which cannot get along because they cannot communicate. Unlike the comparison duck/swan opposing non-native/native speakers (Cook, 1999) where the swan is the more desirable category, the opposition chicken/duck shows no evident hierarchy (who would be the chicken and who the duck in the exchange anyway?) but a sheer separation which cannot be solved.

Mei’s expectations regarding communication are based on social representations of communication, or how it should occur between two individuals. Not exchanging is perceived as rude (“it’s not possible not to answer him”) and failing to do so is perceived as a failure (“it’ll be funny”). The use of the expletive pronoun *it* makes it possible to refer to discourses by others who become unidentifiable (Dervin, 2013). At no point has Mei considered that her interlocutor might have a different view or that being a foreigner would be an acceptable excuse for not answering in the very diverse linguistic ecology of Malaysia (around 140 spoken languages; Ethnologue, n.d.).

Excerpt 3 shows an extreme case where representations of the linguistic ecology lead to absolute refusal of communicating and avoidance of interactions. Li remained cloistered at home at the beginning because she was afraid of not being able to find her way:

Excerpt 3:

Li: *For me...* at first when *I* came, language was a problem, *I* dared not go out, after that *I* knew how to take the public transport, and if *I* wanted to buy something [...]

In situations of mobility, students often prefer locals for academic matters and language but co-nationals for personal help (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006) and managing to have contacts with the locals is perceived as a sign of “engagement”

towards the host country (Sawir et al., 2008). Chinese students tend to stick together (Gu & Maley, 2008) in Western contexts but Li's example shows a situation of self-confinement because of a perceived inability to communicate with the locals. Henze and Zhu (2012) state that "[s]ince most Chinese students studying abroad are without the company of their family, they often feel lonely living in a new culture." Li is not alone in Malaysia, she is there with three other fellow students from the same program of the same university, and finding a Chinese speaker would not have been difficult for her on/around campus. The isolation Li imposes on herself is based on her first representation of Malaysia and Malaysians, perceived as different, inaccessible and, once again, monolingual (all speaking a language Li does not know). The host country and its inhabitants are thus "othered," the result of an opposition *us* versus *them*, *we are in* versus *they are out* (Poutignat & Streiff-Fenart, 2008, p. 134) or rather here *we are out*.

"Othering" Malaysia and "Othering" Self through the Words of Malaysians

The following excerpt occurs in the first part of the focus group discussion, when the (Chinese) Malaysian research assistant is interacting with the participants without the main researcher. The topic of the exchange is the preparation for an academic exchange. Mei relates what a Malaysian, who has spent one semester in Taiwan as an exchange student, told her:

Excerpt 4:

Mei: I have one Malaysian course mate, I asked him. He said, when he reached there... it's quite... he spent one month only to adapt to Taiwan. *He said*, at the beginning, he felt strange, the feeling of *another nation*. But *he said*, there are no big problems with communication.

Mei relates here the voice of an "identifiable other" (Dervin, 2013), a Malaysian course mate, to justify the use of "another nation." The Malaysian in question is an ethnic Chinese like all students registered in the Mandarin program, as well as the research assistant and the other participants. Here Mei self-identifies as a Taiwanese in opposition to a Chinese Malaysian and distances herself from her interlocutor through an *I/you* opposition. Mei implies that the assistant would feel "strange" and would have the idea of "another nation"

because she is a Malaysian like the aforesaid course mate. Mei assigns a national identity to the assistant (hetero-identification) and ignores her ethnicity. Putting the label “another nation” in the mouth of a Malaysian, she is careful to not potentially hurt the assistant’s feeling in stressing the difference of origin. The utterance is tempered by the fact that they are speaking in Mandarin and consequently “there are no big problems with communication” but the act of “othering” is attested.

Another participant, Wen, opposes Chinese Malaysians and Taiwanese on the variety of Mandarin they use. The Malaysian variety lacks purity, it is a “mix” integrating other (foreign) languages:

Excerpt 5:

Wen: The language, the Chinese language *here* and the Chinese language *in Taiwan* is a bit different. Some words or terms are used differently, but we basically understand.

Interviewer: What type of differences?

Wen: Yes, *they* call it *Malaysian Chinese*, where *they mix English or some other words* together, and then to make it *more simple* or to talk faster.

It sounds also less elaborate (“more simple”) and takes on a characteristic attributed to pidgins, it enables the speaker to “talk faster.” The idea of being the speaker of a pure, elaborate variety stresses on power relation where Wen puts himself (and Taiwanese in general) on a higher level than Chinese Malaysians who speak a corrupted variety. The idea is similar to Smith’s (2001) statement that Chinese Malaysians do not draw on Confucian heritage culture as much as the inhabitants of Hong Kong due to the environment they live in, i.e., the contact with other “cultures.” The parallel between language and/or culture subversion is in the disfavor of Malaysians, who are relegated to a lower level in both cases.

This power relation is also noticeable when participants compare the system of evaluation in both countries:

Excerpt 6:

Jun: Emm... for example, Taiwan. *In Taiwan*, we don’t have enforcement for exam. *In Malaysia*, there is a must to have exam during mid-term and the end of semester. But, it is not necessary *for us in Taiwan*. [...] Besides that, there are

many assignments *here*, we don't have so many assignments *in Taiwan*.

Mei: *The burden for assignments is heavier here.*

Jun clearly makes an opposition between *we/for, us/in Taiwan* and *here/in Malaysia*. Evaluation in Taiwan appears as easier. The value of *we* in this excerpt is not clear: Does it mean both Taiwanese participants in this interaction or all Taiwanese students in any university on the island? On the other hand, “in Malaysia” seems to refer to a national requirement that appears strictly enforced in the Malaysian university where they are studying: “there are many assignments here.” The opposition between Taiwan and Malaysia enables Mei to draw judgment in favor of home: the use of “burden” and “heavier” is depreciatory. While a simpler language is seen as negative, a simpler educational system is an asset.

The last excerpt refers to taboos. Taboos are associated with a static representation of culture or rather here customs. They are not analyzed within the framework of communication but are acknowledged as “cultural truth” that nobody should ignore to avoid any miscommunication. The fact that the exchange students focus on taboos, “we will search for this kind of taboos,” reinforces the impression that their representation of Malaysia is static, even monolithic:

Excerpt 7:

Interviewer: Then how did you prepare yourself to come here? What is the preparation you did before you came here?

Jun: [...] And what we were doing extra is, for example, maybe we do some survey online, *search some of the taboos here*, those which we should avoid. For example, when you shake hand with Malays, you can't use your left hand. *We will search this kind of taboo.*

Once again, the only Malaysians who are mentioned are Malays overlooking other ethnic and linguistic groups. The example given may sound a bit awkward as it is quite rare that individuals use the left hand to shake an interlocutor's hand. Moreover, Malays may use both hands to greet with respect. The purpose of formulating it that way is definitively an attempt to other the Malaysian population. This reinforces among mobile students the fear of perpetrating cultural mischief and to be considered as disrespectful of local cultures. These

voices are spread on the internet by “unidentifiable others” (Dervin, 2013).

Conclusion

This contribution is based on the discourse of four Taiwanese exchange students who have spent one semester in Malaysia. We do not assume that their related experiences are representative of the sojourn of other Taiwanese/Chinese/Asian mobile students. Each lived experience is unique and we do not attempt to find any truth that could enlighten us on the adaptation of the Chinese mobile student. We deliberately adopt an approach based on discourse analysis which tells us more on *how* participants present this part of their life than on *what* they say (Dervin, 2013, p. 16).

Communication between Chinese exchange students and local Malaysians first seems to be embedded in the National paradigm (Dervin, 2013). Malaysians are seen by the Taiwanese through their national identity and the reciprocal discourse seems to show that the Taiwanese are seen through the lenses of foreignness. This nationalistic simplification overlooks a more complicated linguistic scenario, in which most Malaysians are at least bilingual and Chinese speakers make up around a fourth of the population.

In preparation for their sojourn, the students associate the country with one (single) people and one (single) language, echoing the construction of European nations in the 19th century (Thiesse, 1999). This connection one language-one people-one nation circulates widely (Machart & Lim, 2013) but a short stay in Malaysia forces the visitor to at least have a glimpse at the linguistic (hyper-) diversity. The systematic reference to a “national paradigm” had important consequences for our participants. It first affected their adaptation because they felt themselves unable to communicate in Malay, when they could easily have used English or Mandarin. The way they relate their experience, distancing from the locals, bring them closer to Chinese students in the West.

Similar results were obtained for Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong. These mobile students considered that they shared little with the locals and vice-versa (Lam, 2006). References to Confucian heritage culture or an opposition East/West to explain/justify the difficulties of adaptation of mobile Chinese students are not relevant in these cases. We believe that this culturalist approach is not more relevant in the case of Chinese students in the West. Many studies

offer only a dichotomist (China/West) view when incorporating a third party may affect considerably the importance given to the Confucian heritage culture. Questioning the experience of Middle Eastern (e.g., Machart & Dervin, 2014) or African in comparison with Chinese mobile students in the same contexts or linking the experience of Chinese students in the West with other non-Western parts of the world would offer us a better insight.

Difficulties related by the Taiwanese students in Malaysia do not differ from similar contributions dealing with Asian or Western students in the West, refuting the cultural nature of the problems. Ying (2002) related for example the case of Taiwanese students who were positively surprised that their adjustment to the American society was smoother than their expectation and Dervin (2008) evokes the case of Erasmus students in Finland. A better preparation for a sojourn abroad seems necessary. It should insist on the diversity of the host society/community using a fluid intercultural approach rather than drawing a sheer opposition between the home and host contexts. Ultimately, it could also contribute to the awareness of diversity in the home society.

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Appendix: Interview Guidelines

1. Why did you choose Malaysia?
2. How did you prepare yourself to come here?
3. Can you speak about your study here?
4. Can you describe your life in Malaysia?
5. After you go back to Taiwan, when you think about your experience in Malaysia, what would you think of?
6. What is your biggest satisfaction here?
7. Do you have anything that make you feel regret of choosing Malaysia?
8. After you return to Taiwan, would you apply for other countries?
9. Do you have Malaysian friends? What do you do with them?