

Negotiating a global identity

Chahida Bouhamou
and Cha-Hsuan Liu



Above (left to right): Önder Düran, Oussouby Sacko, Cha-Hsuan Liu, Janice Deul, Chahida Bouhamou, Seong Bin Hwang, and Elena Valbusa.

The International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), the most inclusive international gathering in the field of Asian Studies, held its 11th edition in Leiden, the Netherlands (15-19 July 2019). Among a flurry of activities, the roundtable 'Negotiating the Global Identity' took place on 18 July. It aimed to open up a dialogue on the value of diversity and how individuals identify themselves in the contemporary globally connected world. Intense discussions broke out about, for example, the 'identity mismatch' and the limitations of seeing identity as an asset in a multicultural society. In order to tackle such challenges regarding identity, it was proposed that we negotiate the 'global identity'.

Instead of focusing on just academic opinions, the panel consisted of members from various backgrounds to enrich the discussions regarding the complexity and the challenges of identity matters. The composition of this roundtable was noteworthy: firstly, the five panellists included two academia (both education and research fields), one policy communication advisor, one journalist cum fashion activist, and a project leader for social inclusion. At the last moment, two students from a Dutch University, two professors from Asian Universities and one Japanese female conference participant joined the discussion. All participants held different ethnical and national identity combinations: Dutch, Chinese (China and Taiwan), Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese, Japanese, Korean, Nigerian, Italian and Malian. The diversity stimulated spontaneous debates and enriched the conclusion of this roundtable.

Is identity a label?

Is identity a label that you assign to yourself, or that is ascribed to you? The roundtable started with moderator Cha-Hsuan Liu's statement that "the term 'identity' is perceived differently in different parts of the world". In Asia, identity is not explicitly mentioned in parenting or fundamental education. In Western culture, however, identity is a recurring topic; it has, for example, become common in Europe to ask people to identify themselves in terms of the ethnic background and/or religion. Cha-Hsuan, currently a lecturer of Multicultural Society and Generation Study at Utrecht University, regards identity formation as an action of making choices: individuals may present various identities in different settings. She argued, how to present 'oneself'

seems to be a choice to create a favourable position in the communication with 'others' rather than a fixed label.

Janice Deul, an activist in the fashion industry, saw the power of fashion as a tool to influence the way in which an individual can be perceived. Fashion, according to Janice, is not (only) about shoes, clothes, and so forth, but it is also about representation, emancipation and a way to express one's identity. It can be used to determine how an individual wants to be perceived by others. In her presentation, Janice provided evidence of how fashion photography can positively/negatively influence public opinion of (images of) ethnic minorities. She discussed how fashion communicates perceptions of beauty, however, it does not reflect the inclusion of a multicultural society in most parts of the world. Janice gave an example of this: a Dutch magazine portrayed and celebrated 'Dutch beauty' by presenting only blonde skinny models with blue eyes. Aside from the fact that beauty is relative, this presentation excluded the Dutch with different ethnic backgrounds. Unintentionally, it proposed to the public that this is the ideal beauty. In this way the industry plays a role in identity creation.

Önder Düran, a lecturer of Interdisciplinary Social Science at Utrecht University, shared his concerns about how he should present himself in public; for example, what he should wear, or how he should 'profile' himself – as a lecturer first? What comes second? He claimed that he carries various identities with him: Islamic, Turkish, and Dutch. In addition, being born in Brabant, perceived as a 'less developed' province by city dwellers in the Netherlands, he was confronted with his provincial accent when he started working at Utrecht University. Önder also shared his worries about identity

formation among the second or the third generation migrant youths in the Netherlands. His comments led to discussions about 'identity confusion'.

Elena Valbusa is the project manager of the *Inclusion* Program at Utrecht University. The program offers people with a refugee background the possibility to study. According to Elena, and the discussions she has had, the 'refugee label' leads to stigmatization and polarization; the program gives them the 'option' to use 'student' as a new label, with which they can proudly introduce themselves. The goal of the program is to allow the refugees to peel off the stigmatized label by replacing it with a new one and to empower them for acceptance in the host society. However, participants in the program have different opinions regarding this student identity. While one participant expressed gratitude towards this student identity for giving her more confidence in the host country, another person indicated that it is just a 'sugarcoating' of reality.

The fourth panellist, Chudi Ukpabi, originally from Nigeria, is a senior international cooperation and development professional, working in governance, strategic communication, and nation building projects in the Netherlands and over 35 African countries. He argued that diversity is not about losing your own values, but gaining new values and identities from other cultures – as is learnt in Nigeria, where people live side by side with diverse identities, languages, religions, ethnicities, traditions, modern and traditional communities, etc. Chudi argued that understanding and respecting cultural diversity is fundamental for building relations, reconciliation, breaking down stereotypes, cultural assumptions. It helps us to deal with global social challenges, such as poverty,

conflicts, environment, equality, genders issues and migration. Therefore, diversity should be seen as a strength not a weakness. He further proposed that global citizenship can be used positively to incorporate different social elements that make up the identities that we are proud of. The 'global identity' is the capacity to remove ourselves from our cultural comfort zone. It does not mean that we have to surrender our own native identity, instead, we can gain new identities and values.

Cha-Hsuan then invited the guest participants to join the roundtable discussion by asking the question: what is identity to you? Chahida Bouhamou, who just obtained her Master's degree at Utrecht University, contributed her experiences of seeking her identity as a second generation Dutch-Moroccan in the Netherlands. In her youth, she felt and believed that identity is one-dimensional: with both parents being born in Morocco, it was never a question what her identity was at home – it was Moroccan without a doubt. However, in her twenties her perspective shifted. She was no longer satisfied with being perceived as Moroccan, which in fact legitimized the lack of access to resources and possibilities in Dutch mainstream society. For that reason, Chahida insisted on presenting herself as Dutch and correcting people when she was referred to as a Moroccan. Over time, she came to understand that she is the one who determines her identity. According to her, identity involves more than ethnicity or nationality, and for that reason identity should be seen as fluid and not static. Chahida's experiences heated up the discussions and debates in the second session of the roundtable. Three themes emerged with regard to identity: the 'identity mismatch', identity is 'an asset', and negotiating a 'global identity'.

The identity mismatch

Yiran, a PHD candidate at Leiden University, identifies herself as Chinese and not Dutch even though she migrated to the Netherlands many years ago. She found it difficult to fully understand Chahida's identity struggle and wondered why Chahida insisted on her Dutch identity. Interestingly, Elena stated that some newcomers in the Netherlands (e.g., Syrian refugees) share similar thoughts as Yiran. One could consider the fact that Yiran, Elena and the refugees mentioned are first generation migrants, whilst Chahida is second generation. While first generation migrants tend to carry their original identities to the host country, the second generation have fewer emotions linked to the lands where their parents came from. For example, first generation Dutch Moroccans use the Moroccan word for 'going home' to refer to their yearly vacation to Morocco. On the other hand, the later generations, born or raised in the Netherlands, do not necessarily share that perspective and seek to be validated as Dutch citizens. There seems to be a discrepancy between the generations in the understanding of identity, which might not yet be explored in academic debates. The second generation's self-identity and their identity proposed by the family are mismatched. Furthermore, the majority of the host society tend to ignore the fact that later generations of migrants identify with their current home and continue to identify this group as 'foreign'.

Önder addressed his experiences with a mismatch concerning his religion. In the Netherlands there is freedom of religion, however, the normative situation is different than society claims. When being in contact with the majority of the Dutch, he has always felt that his religious identity wasn't allowed to be presented. Contrary to the ideology of the Netherlands to respect all values and expressions of religion, Önder indicated that he does not have the same freedom to manifest his religious beliefs when it comes to Islam, which is still largely perceived as a threat to the Judeo-Christian society and to Democracy. Nonetheless, he does not want to deny this part of his identity; that would be like erasing a part of his family's history and memories.

Elena faced a contradictive situation. Ever since she married a Dutch man and moved to the Netherlands, her Italian family perceives her identity as a mixture of Italian-Dutch and not solely Italian. Some members of the family find it difficult to accept or to understand her choice to move to another country, and therefore frame her living abroad as some sort of 'betrayal' to her Italian cultural heritage. It seems that her acceptance of Dutch identity is regarded as the abandonment of her cultural roots.

The mismatch takes place when the self-identity(ies) of an individual does not match with the identity(ies) ascribed by others, often the majority. Oussouby Sacko, President of Kyoto Seika University, joined the discussion. As a Muslim from Mali living in Japan, he stated that when meeting new Japanese people, conversations usually start with the other person saying: "We love animals. We envy you. You are able to see lions and elephants every day". And even though he has the Japanese nationality, he is never perceived as Japanese.

Seong Bin Hwang who is a professor in Japan, shared a similar story. He was born in South Korea but has lived in Japan for more than half of his life. He is respected in Japanese society for his academic accomplishments and career, yet the majority still do not consider him as Japanese, regardless of the fact that his appearance does not differ from the natives and that his Japanese is better than his Korean. He argued that acceptance by the majority can only be enhanced by creating awareness of such issues through education.

It was concluded that a few of the factors leading to a mismatch include one's cultural/ethnic background, religion and/or appearance. This raised a further question: is a mismatch inevitable or is there room to adjust the narrow perspective of what a true (national) identity entails. If there is indeed room, how much space is there for identity to be altered and claimed. Yiran made a valid point by stating that she sees identity as a tool with which to identify herself, and not one with which others can identify her.

Yoko, a Japanese woman married to a Caucasian Dutch man, who has lived in the

Netherlands for quite some time, but who has had no experience in the Dutch labour environment, stated that she has not had the negative experiences (e.g., discrimination) in the Netherlands that were shared by some of the other participants of the roundtable. She also could not recognize the experiences shared by Oussouby and Seong Bin about her home country Japan. This led to agitated reactions from a few of the participants. The explanation offered for Yoko's experience by the roundtable members was that Yoko might not acknowledge her privileged position in both countries. In Japan, Yoko is part of the dominant majority and therefore might overlook the discrimination that the minority is confronted with. In addition to her Dutch family's status, the Japanese in the Netherlands are considered to be 'honoured Western migrants' – Japan is classified as 'Western' because it is a rich and industrialized country. In other words, Yoko's Japanese identity appears to be an asset that secures her living circumstances. And so at that point, and in line with Yiran's earlier statement that identity is a tool, the focus of the debate shifted from identity mismatch to the positive aspects of identity.

Identity as an asset and its limitations

Both Yiran's and Yoko's statements indicated that identity can sometimes be seen as an asset to negotiate one's space in a multicultural society, consciously or unconsciously. They are both very confident about their own identities and even present it to their advantage. For instance, as Chinese are perceived to be 'model migrants' in many countries, Yiran's contribution to the University is appreciated. These positive stories stimulated the roundtable participants to view identity from an intersectional point to gain insight into how differently identity can be experienced. A clear thin line was revealed between the experiences of the privileged and nonprivileged. Based on the stories of Yoko, Oussouby and Seong Bin, their socio-economic related identities create a privileged position in which they are accepted by the host society regardless of being seen as a member of the majority or not.

Not all people with a bi-cultural background are able to enjoy the same privileged position to climb up the socio-economic ladder. The participants argued that people with a bicultural background with higher education, or even with a high financial status, may still, up to a certain point, need to claim the value of their identity instead of have it be granted. For those with a bi-cultural background who are low on the socio-economic ladder, their social space might be strongly determined by factors such as gender, class, ethnic background, educational level, physical ability, sexual orientation and so forth. We cannot deny that improving one's socio-economic status can create valuable identities that increase acceptance by the majority. Such a privileged position can also grant access to other countless rights (e.g., job opportunities), in turn further increasing one's position on the socio-economic ladder. Nevertheless, this positive influence is limited. Just like in the caste system in India, once an individual is bound to the caste they were born into, their education or wealth may not be enough to move upwards on the socio-economic ladder. In the Netherlands, although there is no such caste system, there are still symbolic

and social boundaries that limit the social mobility for some minority groups. This means that agency is only effective up to a certain point and societal changes have to be made to ensure social mobility for all groups regardless of factors such as gender, ethnic background, religion, etc.

Negotiating identity

In the roundtable discussion, there were increasingly dissatisfied sounds heard from participants with bi-cultural backgrounds. Some felt that their social position undermines the equal access to resources and opportunities. Some shared their experiences of investing effort to fight against discrimination and racism; for example, Janice's work to create space for models with darker skin tones in the fashion world, and Önder's blog about positive identity formation amongst migrant youths. Cha-Hsuan then invited the participants to rethink ways of empowering minorities to gain societal space, beyond the negative images of certain identities, and the limitations of identity as an asset.

A soft approach was proposed: redefine the identities that an individual carries. Cha-Hsuan gave an example of a Taiwanese female friend of hers who, instead of introducing herself as a migrant, uses the term 'cultural enricher' to advocate for the value of her presence in Dutch society. Oussouby shared his observation of how Africans in Japan nowadays align their identity with the African American pop culture to turn the negative images of, for example, people from low-income African countries, into a cultural trend and a perception of economic power. According to Oussouby, it is not an easy process to change misconceptions and stereotypes, but through intercultural exchange both sides can advance their views about each other. Following the previous discussion about 'identity as an asset', acquiring a valued identity for social mobility was also suggested. Socially desirable identities that are seen as 'positive' and 'valuable', such as a master's degree may facilitate individuals in claiming social space.

The roundtable participants argued that the success of these soft approaches depends on how much space the majority chooses to share with the minority members. The process of an attitude change in a society can take a long time. Therefore, it is understandable that some members from disadvantaged cultural groups elect to demand respect from society through activism. Petitions or demonstrations are used to provoke the issues around identity and social acceptance. However, the hard approach also has its limitations because resistance does not always inspire goodwill from the majority.

The approaches mentioned above all aim to convince the majority of the valuable contribution of diverse groups in a multicultural society, and to demand inclusivity, regardless of any cultural background. As Chahida stated, she should be appreciated as a member of Dutch society, rather than be seen as being part of a specific cultural group. In other words, a society with diversity, not a society with minorities. In such an egalitarian society all members can be respected and have equal access to human rights on the basis of their innate merits, not the value defined by secular social desires.

Oussouby further suggested that Chudi's idea of having a 'global citizen identity' can be an ideal solution to the identity challenges

that many people are facing. The 'global citizen identity' is conceptualised as the ultimate form of an inclusive identity that tackles the mismatch between the self-identity and identity ascribed by others in a multicultural society. The global citizen identity can be understood as a melting pot of multiple identities in which there is a dialogue concerning values, cultures, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and so forth. Chudi suggested, the global citizen identity – a collective term of having multiple identities – will be an asset that can be used all over the world. Multiple identities allow you to adapt depending on the place or situation you are in. Oussouby and Chudi outlined an ideal situation in which people can define themselves as global citizens whose cultural capital is heavily valued.

To what extent is this global identity feasible? An important condition would appear to be that the proposed identity is recognized and respected by others. For example, in recognizing the need for a third gender choice, an 'X' was introduced for Dutch passports in 2018. This movement provided the choice of a non-binary gender identity to people who do not want to be identified as male or female (gender neutral) or those who identify themselves both as male and female (gender fluid). Participants agreed that manifesting the 'global identity' can reinforce the 'we' feeling and allow us to embrace all identities perceived.

Oussouby added that since acceptance of diversity concerns the (ethnic) minorities more than the majority, the effort to change this perspective has to come from people of colour. Unfortunately though, access to rights, resources and possibilities, is very much tied up with one's identity and position in society. Yet to make the global identity a success, it is essential that this perspective on identity should become mainstream and not an idea promoted only by people with different cultural backgrounds. It was a pity that there was only one roundtable participant considered to be a member of Dutch society's majority. Dominique Voskuyl, a Dutch student of Wageningen University & Research, shared her mixed feelings about being a minority at the table, yet also expressed her gratitude for the knowledge and emotions shared by the participants with bi-cultural backgrounds. Following her reflection, those present raised their concerns about the lack of communication between the majority and minority and welcomed the majority's voice to provide different views in the debate.

The debate on the mismatch of identities, the acknowledgement of a fluid identity, and the acquisition of a global identity, led to the suggestion of three approaches to deal with the negative impacts of identity and with shaping benefits of identity. From an individual's aspect, one could try to redefine their identity to one with more value, or to advocate for the value of their existing identity. From society's aspect, an inclusive society that respects all cultural values should be encouraged. And last but not least, a global identity is proposed to overarch the strengths of an individual's multiple identities – thereby creating a new global 'we'. More discussions regarding the inclusivity of identity in a multicultural society are necessary. If all society members participate in such identity discussions, then equality and inclusivity between and among the diverse identities can be achieved.

Chahida Bouhamou and
Cha-Hsuan Liu, Utrecht University

We would like to thank the participants of this roundtable for their bright minds and valuable contributions to this article:

Moderator
Cha-Hsuan Liu, Utrecht University

Panellists
Janice Duel, journalist and fashion activist
Önder Düran, Utrecht University
Elena Valbusa, Utrecht University
Chudi Victor Ukpabi, Chudi Communication Consult the Netherlands

Participants
Chahida Bouhamou, Utrecht University
Seong Bin Hwang, Rikkyo University Japan
Yoko Odaka, Japan
Oussouby Sacko, Kyoto Seika University
Dominique Voskuyl, Wageningen University & Research
Yiran Yang, Leiden University

