Negotiating a global identity

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 education and research fields), one policy communication advisor, one journalist cum fashion activist, and a project leader for social education and research fields. In the second session of the roundtable, Cha-Hsuan Liu, currently a lecturer of Asian Universities and one Japanese female conference participant joined the discussion. All participants held different ethnic 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 is that 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 Volbusa 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 Ukpori, 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, gandhas 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 study

Identity and its limitations

Both Yoko’s and Yiran’s statements indicate that identity can be seen as an asset to negotiate one’s space in a multicultural society, consciously or unconsciously. Yoko shared her perception about her own identities and even present it to their advantage. For instance, as Chinese, she is part of the group that is seen as pretty sophisticated and indeed her identity was reflected in the eyes of her husband. Yoko’s contribution to the University is appreciated. These positive stories illustrate that the roundtable members of this roundtable participant considered to be a member of her host country. The process of having multiple identities – will be an asset to claim 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 society can take a long time. Therefore, it is understandable that some members from disadvantaged cultural backgrounds feel limited in terms of advancement. They only have the opportunity to participate in discussions, but not to lead them. The majority of the participants agreed that agency is only effective up to a certain level, and therefore, representatives of different cultural backgrounds should become mainstream and not an idea promoted only by people from minority backgrounds. The roundtable participants felt that the global citizen identity is recognized and respected by others. Many of the participants from various cultural backgrounds expressed their feelings about being a minority at the table, yet also expressed their gratitude for the knowledge and experiences that they shared with bi-cultural backgrounds. Following her reflection, they presented 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. They pointed out that through both promotion strategies, the acknowledgement of a fluid identity, and the acquisition of a global identity, led to the suggested solution of investing effort to fight against discriminatory practices and stereotypes, but through intercultural exchange both sides can advance their views and understand each other’s backgrounds. The majority of the participants agreed that the global citizen identity appears to be an asset that secures more freedom and mobility for some minority groups. This article also discusses that social space can be achieved through the recognition of bi-cultural roots.

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The approaches mentioned above all aim to convince the majority of the value of cultural diversity. 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 social indicators. Oussouy 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 conceptualized as the ultimate identity. Yet, the discussion on how to tackle the mismatch between the self-identity and identity ascribed by others in a multicultural society can be seen as an asset that can be used all over the world. Multiple identities allow you to adapt depending on the place you are located in. Oussouy and Chudi outlined an ideal situation in which people with different cultural backgrounds can call themselves whose cultural capital is heavily valued.

To what extent is this global identity feasible? This question appeared to be that the proposed identity is recognized and respected by others. For example, Elena suggested that the bi-cultural identity, as an example, is "X" was introduced for Dutch passports in 2018. This movement proved that the communication between the majority and minority groups is the key to overcoming discrimination and stereotyping. Although the idea of having multiple identities more than the majority, the effort to change this perspective has to come from people of cultural minorities. The global citizen identity is essential that this perspective on identity should become mainstream and not an idea promoted only by people from minority backgrounds. Oussouy and Chudi pointed out that the ‘global citizen identity’ that this paper suggests can be used to embrace all identities perceived. Oussouy added that since acceptance of diversity is the key to future of this world. The majority more than the majority, the effort to change this perspective has to come from people of cultural minorities. The global citizen identity is essential that this perspective on identity should become mainstream and not an idea promoted only by people from minority backgrounds. Oussouy and Chudi outlined an ideal situation in which people with different cultural backgrounds can call themselves whose cultural capital is heavily valued.

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