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Discourses of Chinese Cultures: A Tale of Many Cities

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Abstract

Since the '50s, the once highly unified Chinese culture is now fragmented, leading to a variety of cultural derivatives, such as mainland Chinese culture, Hong Kong Chinese culture, Singaporean Chinese culture and Malaysian Chinese culture. Although still called Chinese culture, each has its own distinctive form. Communities like the mainland Chinese, the Hong Kong people, the Chinese Singaporeans and the Chinese Malaysians differ considerably from one another in such cultural aspects as behavioural approach, thinking mode, mental attitude and vocabulary. This paper examines some features of major Chinese-background discourses in Asia with a particular focus on educational aspects and issues.

Introduction

Although a similar culture is shared by Chinese background students from mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, any common culture cannot be authentically understood detachedly from its sociological settings (Guibemau & Goldblatt, 2000). There is sufficient evidence from the literature on learning approaches to suggest that different approaches result from different social and educational experiences (Riding & Sadler-Smith, 1997; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997; Vermunt, 1996). Consequently, sociological diversity has an impact on the selection of students' approaches to learning, which also helps develop a specific national identity. This paper attempts to examine the social and educational backgrounds in which these Chinese-background students were brought up. The discussion focuses on the following similar but distinctive Chinese-background discourses: mainland, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.

Chinese discourses

Since 2002 mainland China first started to outnumber all sources of international students in Australian education exports (AVCC, 2005, p. 47), and this growth has been maintained. Together with Chinese ethnic students from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, Chinese background students represent a majority of international

students in Australia. Chinese background students have at times been treated as a single group who have a tendency to take surface approaches to study (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Devos, 2003; Gribble & Ziguras, 2003). However, there has been little research on distinctions in the approaches to learning of these students, Burns distinguished the approaches of students from Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong but did not distinguish between ethnic groups (R. B Burns, 1991; Ninnes, Aitchison, & Kalos, 1999).

Snider (2005) identified international students from P.R.China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Indonesia as Chinese; Barron (2005) also grouped Chinese background students with CHC students from China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam as an integrated parameter to measure; in Barker's PhD thesis (1993), a comparative study was designed between Australian and ethnic Chinese university students in Australia which also viewed students from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore as a single unit

An issue arises as to how well Australian teachers are prepared for teaching different Chinese nationals in Australian universities. That preparation can be informed by a better understanding of Chinese discourses.

The term Chinese students can create some confusion among Australian students and academics, particularly for those who lack intercultural awareness. The following discussion will examine the major Chinese discourses according to the regions in which students with Chinese backgrounds live.

Mainland Chinese

Mainland Chinese students have become an educational phenomenon in the Australian educational discourse. They bring along not only a strong desire for educational advancement but also distinctive characteristics from different social contexts of the People Republic of China. Some of these characteristics may manifest strongly or weakly in a new cultural context.

China is a multinational country, with a population composed of a large number of ethnic and linguistic groups. Thus, the basic classification of the population is not so much ethnic as linguistic. The Han (Chinese), the largest group, outnumber the minority groups or minority nationalities in every province or autonomous region except Tibet and Sinkiang. The Han, therefore, form the great homogeneous mass of the Chinese people, sharing the same culture, the same traditions, and the same written language. Some 55 minority groups are spread over approximately three-fifths of the total area of the country. By far the most important Chinese tongue is Mandarin, meaning "ordinary language" or "common language."

Traditional Chinese culture attached great importance to education as a means of enhancing a person's worth and career. Since 1986, China has adopted the "nine-year compulsory schooling system" education policy, which means that all children are required to attend school for at least nine years. During this period, students will finish both the primary school program and the junior middle-school program. In higher education, students must pass examinations at all levels. First, they need to pass the entrance examination for senior secondary schools or secondary-level technical schools. Then after two, three or four years, they may sit for the national college entrance examination.

In the Mao era, politics totally controlled culture, which was under attack from two sides. On the one hand, Marxism-Leninism came to be the dominant national ideology. Traditional features like humanism, propriety, tolerance and refined manners were labelled feudalistic and eliminated by the political system. On the other hand, certain politicised Confucian concepts, such as "the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues", were used to form the management model of the ruling class and provide the cultural background for the political operation of the Communist dictatorship. The cultural crisis is closely related to the fact that politicised Confucianism and Marxism share the same structure, and to the "anti-intellectualism" shared by the vulgar culture and marginalised cultural thinking in Marxism, Leninism and Mao thought. Under this double blow, the collapse of culture was complete during the so-called "Cultural Revolution", when the opposite "anti-tradition" and "extreme tradition" appeared at the same time. Such deconstruction of Chinese culture is fundamental, as it happens at all levels of the cultural value system, whether they are mainstream tradition or derivative beliefs, refined culture or popular culture. With "anti-tradition" and other official slogans which aimed to sweep away old customs, feudalism and political enemies, the genteel class was eliminated, intellectuals and the representatives of Chinese culture were prosecuted, millennia of Chinese civilisation, along with cultural classics and relics, were destroyed. While on the other hand, the imperial, hierarchical system, the monarchical power and obscurantism were prevalent to their extremity. The cultural crisis in China lies mainly in the loss of humanist spirituality and the general value vacuum. The unified traditional Chinese culture has disintegrated; many of the historically established concepts have been lost. Thus it is not difficult to see that the dilution of Chinese features means that traditional Chinese culture is no longer indigenous, singular and pure. Diversity happens not only between different cultures such as Chinese and Western cultures, but among variations of the same culture.

Hong Kong Chinese

The Cantonese began to settle in Hong Kong about 100 BC. Before the British arrived in the mid-19th century, Hong Kong Island was inhabited only by a small fishing population, with few features to recommend it for settlement. It lacked fertile soil and fresh water, was mountainous, and was reputed to be a notorious haunt of pirates. On July 1, 1997, Hong Kong was returned to Chinese control, when the sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred to the People's Republic of China (PRC), ending more than 150 years of British colonial control. Chinese and English are both official languages. Chinese, especially Cantonese in the spoken form, is the common language and is almost universally understood. A variety of dialects and other languages are used among the ethnic minorities. The religious persuasions of the people of Hong Kong are as various as their languages and dialects. Among the Chinese, followers of Buddhism and Taoism by far outnumber other groups. (Britannica Online, 2006b)

Primary education in Hong Kong covers a wide curriculum. Core subjects include Chinese, English, and mathematics. Other basic subjects include social studies, sciences (physics, chemistry and biology), and health education, music, physical education, and art and craft. The teaching medium in most local schools is Chinese, with English as a second language. Secondary education in Hong Kong is largely based on the English schooling system. Secondary school begins in the seventh year of formal education.

Students are required by law to spend five years in secondary schools. In the first three years (forms one to three) of secondary education, the focus is on general, instead of subject-specific, education. In form four, students choose between a "Science" stream and an "Arts stream (Wikipedia, 2006b)

Singaporean Chinese

Singapore has the most advanced economy in Southeast Asia and is often mentioned along with other rapidly industrialising countries and regions in Asia, notably South Korea and Taiwan. Singapore has a highly developed and successful free market economy, and enjoys a remarkably open and corruption-free environment, stable prices, and a high per capita GDP. The Singaporean population is 3.5 million. The population of Singapore is diverse, the result of considerable past immigration. Chinese predominate, making up more than three-fourths of the total (in mid 2004 Chinese accounted for 76%). Malays are the next largest ethnic group, and Indians the third. Because of this ethnic diversity, no fewer than four official languages are recognised—English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. English remains the main medium for administration, commerce, and industry, and is the primary language of instruction in schools. (Britannica Online, 2006b)

Universities and polytechnics equip students with knowledge and skills that will bring them to a higher level in the quest for learning. Students can choose from the myriad of courses offered by Singapore's five polytechnics, four local universities, world-class foreign universities and numerous private schools. The National University of Singapore (NUS) was founded in 1980, from a merger of the University of Singapore and Nanyang University. The Nanyang Technological Institute became the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in 1991. The government is concerned that the traditional educational basis of rote learning and written examinations is stifling the creativity seen as necessary for success in a modern developed economy. (EIU, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2004; Singapore Education, 2003)

Malaysian Chinese

The population of Malaysia shows great ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. A significant distinction is made between indigenous peoples (aborigines and Malays, collectively often called bumiputra) and immigrants (primarily Chinese and South Asians). In addition, there are important differences between the indigenous peoples themselves and among religious groups. In general, there are four groups of people: the Orang Asli (aborigines), the Malays, the Chinese, and the South Asians. The Chinese, who make up about one-third of the peninsular population, originally migrated from south eastern China. Several different dialects are spoken, notably Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, and Hainanese. Tertiary education in the public universities is heavily subsidised by the government. Applicants to public universities must have completed the matriculation program or have an STPM grade. Excellence in these examinations does not guarantee a place in a public university. The selection criteria are largely opaque as no strictly enforced defined guidelines exist. There are ten public universities in Malaysia open to all Malaysians, but only one for Bumiputra. Private university students pay full tuition fees and most of the universities are formed by GLC (Government Linked

Companies). Racial quotas, a highly politicised and controversial issue in Malaysia, exist for university admission. However, in 2002 the government announced a reduction of reliance on racial quotas, instead leaning more towards meritocracy.

The issue of language and schools is a key issue for many political groups in Malaysia. UMNO championed the cause of Malay usage in schools but private schools using the Chinese and Tamil language are allowed. These schools are referred to as "vernacular schools" as opposed to "government schools" where Malay is the medium of instruction. Due to the existence of vernacular schools, worries exist that students are not interacting enough with those of other races. (Wikipedia, 2006c)

Chinese learners in a Yin-Yang variation

Since 2002 mainland China started to outnumber all sources of international students in Australian education exports (AVCC, 2005, p. 47), and this growth has been maintained. Together with Chinese ethnic students from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, Chinese background students represent the majority of international students in Australia. Chinese background students have at times been treated as a single group who have a tendency to take surface approaches to study (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Devos, 2003; Gribble & Ziguras, 2003). There is sufficient evidence from the literature on learning approaches to suggest that different approaches result from different social and educational experiences (Riding & Sadler-Smith, 1997; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997; Vermunt, 1996). Chinese background students from different educational and social environments can also be expected to show differences in their approaches to learning. It is useful to note Rizvi and Walsh's (1998) warning against fixed conceptualisation of cultural characteristics that may also apply within the Chinese background groups. Nevertheless, it is a fact that there has been little research which controls for cultural heritage comparing student learning approaches among different Chinese national groups,. It was only the Smith (2001) study that effectively controlled for nationality among the Chinese background students, drawing samples from a number of countries.

As discussed, mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia have developed their own economic, political, cultural and educational systems. Differences between these four countries are explored. Though there are fundamental common features among these Chinese-background students, they differ considerably from one another in such cultural aspects as behavioural approach, thinking mode, mental attitude and vocabulary (Chen, 2004).

According to Chen, the ability of the mainland Chinese to circumvent rules, their positive attitude and eloquence; the law-abiding conscience, community sense and empirical characteristics of the Hong Kong people, the docility, punctiliousness and authority-worship of the Singaporeans....are features unique to each nationality. The linguistic style and word usage of these nations are so different that some have claimed that the segregated evolution over the last several decades has left its imprint on the appearance, gesture and image of these communities. (Chen, 2004 p. 4)

This extraordinary phenomenon is of course due to different social environments. With respect to politics, the differences between these countries and regions are clear in that mainland China features a one-party socialism, however, Singapore and Malaysia have

parliamentary capitalism, as does Hong Kong, although with limited suffrage. Political environments determine the nature of what national cultures are advocated and promoted in their respective countries. Since the '50s, the once highly unified Chinese culture is now fragmented, leading to a variety of cultural derivatives, such as mainland Chinese culture, Hong Kong Chinese culture, Singaporean Chinese culture and Malaysian Chinese culture. Although still called Chinese culture, they have their distinctive discourses.

Being a minority group (albeit a large minority) it is highly possible that a 'cognitive transition' (Holt & Keats, 1992) effect has occurred among Malaysian-Chinese in that their value and belief systems have been influenced to some extent by those of the majority Malay ethnic group. In both Hong Kong and Singapore (predominantly Chinese ethnicity) the language of instruction in schools is English (Renshaw & Volet, 1995).

Renshaw and Volet (1995) point out that 96% of Singaporean students tested reported English as their first language, and English is commonly spoken in everyday social and business life. In Hong Kong, as in Singapore English is the official medium of instruction, although 'Chinglish' is more often the norm. In many tutorials and lectures in Hong Kong, the language used in instruction often switches between English and Cantonese. This, together with the fact that English is hardly ever spoken outside school, restricts Hong Kong students' experience in the use of English (Biggs, 1990a). The mother tongue for approximately 96% of Hong Kong people is Cantonese (Biggs, 1990b).

Unlike students from Hong Kong and Singapore where most students speak two languages (English and Chinese), the Malaysian Chinese students typically speak at least three languages – Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and English. By contrast, in mainland China Chinese is the only language of instruction and also the sole official language. As has been indicated, mainland Chinese, Malaysian-Chinese, Singaporean and Hong Kong students differ in their linguistic experiences and this could have a great impact on their study approaches and learning styles.

It is suggested that the following themes be included in research dealing with Chinese-background students.

- Chinese background students' learning approaches in Australian tertiary education discourse, by separately investigating motivation, self-related belief, learning strategies, and learning preferences;
- Characteristics between these groups of students with respect to motivation, self-related belief, learning strategies, and learning preferences;
- learning approaches in terms of gender, age, and linguistic backgrounds;
- implications for teaching these students at different levels in Australian institutions;
- guiding principles for teachers who are or will be teaching Chinese background students in Australian universities;

Conclusion

International students have made a significant contribution to the Australian economy. Most of them come from Asia and Chinese-background students are a major force. Due to the rapid increase of Asian students in Australian tertiary education, it is important that intercultural awareness should be promoted to ensure better understanding of the cultures and the backgrounds that these students bring to Australia. This paper attempts to provide some insights about Chinese-background students and their different Chinese discourses.

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