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Interpreting Chinese Experience in Japan: A Case Study

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By May 2003 the number of foreign students in Japan reached 109,508. Students from mainland China (70,814) form the largest regional group. Despite the rapid growth of this social group, there has been very little research conducted on this population and virtually none that has solicited the voice of the students themselves. The current case study is part of a longitudinal study of seven female Chinese students in Tokyo. The data were collected from participant observations, interviews and documentations.

Poststructural theories of subjectivity (Weedon, 1997) and discourse (Foucault, 1972) are utilized to interpret the process of identity construction and the influence of social discourses on my participant's experience in Japan. Data analysis shows that marginalized economic and social subject positions confined my participant to peripheral participation in all aspects of her social life, which, in turn, led her to negative interpretation of her experience in Japan.

2003年5月までに在日留学生の総数は109,508人に達した。この中で中国大陸からの学生(70,814人)は最多数を形成している。この社会集団が急激に増加しているにもかかわらず、彼らに対する調査はほとんどおこなわれてこなかった。また、学生たち自身の肉声は実質的に明らかにされてこなかった。本研究で扱うケーススタディーは東京在住の7名の中国人女子学生に対する縦断的研究の一部である。データは実生活を観察すること、インタビュー、そして文献から集められている。主観性(Weedon, 1997)およびディスコース(Foucault, 1972)におけるポスト構造主義の理論を使って、研究対象である被験者、彼女らのアイデンティティの形成過程、また、社会的なやりとりが日本での彼女らの経験に与える影響について解釈することを試みている。データの分析により、経済的にも社会的にも疎外された存在であることが被験者たちの社会生活のあらゆる面において、周辺的な参加にとどまっていることが明らかになった。このことがさらに彼女の日本での経験に対する否定的な解釈へとつながることになっている。

Introduction

In 1983 the, then, Japan Ministry of Education established the goal of increasing the number of Japan's international students to one hundred thousand by the early period of the 21st century. This was the same period of time when China, under the leadership of Deng Xiao Ping, emerged from the shadow of the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and turned its eyes to the outside world. These changes in national policy with a positive motivation on the Chinese side and inviting currents on the Japanese side brought hundreds, thousands, and then, hundreds of thousands of students from mainland China to Japan.

Over the past two decades the number of Chinese students in Japan has increased by a factor of 9 to reach 70,814. At present 65% of the international student population in Japanese university campus is from mainland China. Despite the rapid growth of the Chinese student population in Japan, there has been very limited research conducted on this new social group and virtually none that solicited the voices of the students themselves. Some basic questions remain unanswered: Why do these Chinese students come to Japan? What are some of their expectations? What kinds of experiences do they have in Japan? What are their attitudes towards Japan and Japanese people? Are their goals and objectives fulfilled? How do they relate this experience of studying in Japan to their future?

The current case study is part of a three-year longitudinal study of seven female Chinese students in Tokyo. I attempt to investigate and interpret my participant's experience in Japan. Utilizing poststructural concepts of subjectivity and discourse, I try to examine how her view of herself and her way of thinking relate to her experience in Japan.

Theoretical framework

Taking a poststructural epistemological perspective

Poststructuralism is an intellectual movement that was rooted in the late 1960s in France. It refers to a set of theoretical positions or group of approaches which are concerned with a wide range of themes including the function of language, “truth” and “reality,” epistemology, meaning interpretation, and the interpretation of human social experience. These theoretical perspectives have been developed in and from the work of Althusser (1971), Derrida (e.g. 1973, 1976, 1978), Lacan (e.g. 1977, 1979), Kristeva (e.g. 1981, 1986), Foucault (e.g. 1967, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1977, 1980, 1981, 1986, 1988), Lyotard (1984), and many others.

Though poststructuralism is not a school, and there is no common “theory” shared by all its practitioners, certain underpinning assumptions are demonstrated by this group—their rejection of totalizing, essentialist, and foundationalist concepts. As summarized by Lye (1997), poststructuralism rejects the idea of totalizing all things under one concept; it is opposed to the essentialist notion of a “reality” which is independent of language; it casts doubt on the foundationalist conception of an objective world. In Sim's (1999) words, poststructuralism is “a form of skepticism—skepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms, etc.” (p. 3).

Some broad themes in this body of thoughts and practice—those of meaning, subject and subjectivity, discourse—offer very useful ways to examine individual social experience. In this section, I will present a brief discussion of the poststructural concepts that inform the current study—those of subjectivity and discourse; and I will also discuss how these concepts are utilized to help me to interpret my participant's experience in Japan.

Subject, subjectivity, and agency

Investigation of any social experience requires examination of its participants—the social individuals. Different conceptualization of the human individual leads to different approaches to the interpretations of human social experience. In the current study I take a poststructural view of social individual in my interpretation of the experience of my participant, Dan, in Japan.

Poststructuralism perceives human individuals as socially and historically constructed subjects. Althusser (1971) conceptualizes human individuals as conveyors of mainstream ideologies who are totally constrained by the culture in which they live. Emphasizing power relations in human subject construction, Foucault (1983) identifies two meanings for the word subject: “subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (p. 212). Both Althusser and Foucault argue for a conception of human individuals who are not free but confined by the dominant ideology or power relations of the culture in which they live.

In feminist interpretations of Foucault, Althusser and others, the human subject becomes a site of freedom and a site of struggle. Weedon (1997) defines subjectivity as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). She argues that human subjects are produced historically and socially. We acquire our sense of ourselves and our ways of thinking in the particular discourses in which we live. However, forms of our subjectivity are not fixed; instead, they are multiple and always changing across the wide range of discursive fields which constitute them. This view of subjectivity captures the culturally confined human subject on

one hand and emphasizes an active social individual equipped with human agency on the other. Citing St. Pierre (2000), feminist interpretation of poststructuralism reveals:

a double move in the construction of subjectivity: a subject that exhibits agency as it constructs itself by taking up available discourses and cultural practices and a subject that, at the same time, is subjected, forced into subjectivity by those same discourses and practices (p. 502)

Poststructural and feminist poststructural concepts of subject, subjectivity and agency discussed above present me with one dimension to the examination and interpretation of my participant’s experience in Japan. They suggest to me a set of questions to be asked in my data collection and data analysis. My participant, Dan, who was raised and educated in China in the last quarter of the twentieth century, is, in a poststructural sense, a product of the particular social and historical culture in which she lives. Then, what are some of ideologies that constitute her subjectivities? Moving into the Japanese social context, how does her sense of herself—her subjectivities—go through another course of construction and reconstruction? How do changing social discourses function in the process of her subjectivity reconstruction? In what situations, is her human agency activated to enable Dan to take up certain subject positions and reject others?

Discourse as a key to the understanding of social experience

The concept of discourse is key to poststructural analysis. Popularized by the work of Michel Foucault (1970, 1972), especially his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the concept of discourse has been given special prominence in contemporary

intellectual analysis in the last two decades. Foucault (1977) uses the concept of “discourse” to refer to the function of language that creates the innate and intrinsic order of the world. Interpreting Foucault, Weedon (1997) states that discourses are systems of constituting knowledge, and they govern social subjects’ conscious and unconscious minds as well as their emotional lives. Every social subject lives within the rules of social discourses and is confined within certain ways of thinking, valuing and behaving. Therefore, discourses as systems of thought and ways of constituting knowledge have constructive effects upon social identities and social relations. However, to be effective, discourses require activation through the agency of the individuals whom they constitute and govern (Weedon, 1997).

In a poststructural sense, my participant, Dan, is both subjected to as well as the subject of the social discourses in which she lives. The discourses in the culture in which she lived for some twenty years in China prior coming to Japan constitute within her certain ways of thinking, valuing and behaving. Her previous personal experience and social background—her social status in China, her family background, her educational experience, etc.—constitute within her a certain sense of herself as well as certain ways of understanding the world. After coming to Japan, she was faced with a set of different social relations and social discourses and was forced to conduct a whole process of subjectivity reconstruction in the Japanese social context. Then, what are her previously constructed ways of thinking? In what way do they fit or not fit into Dan’s current social environment? And how does the interaction process between discourses and social environment influence Dan’s subjectivity construction?

Method

Getting to know Dan

I got to know Dan in the summer of 2000 in a public student dormitory in central Tokyo. I will refer to the dormitory as the Moon Residence hereafter. The Moon Residence was a four-floor building belonging to a private medical school. Due to low enrollment at the school, and also because of some family relationship with Chinese, the owner of the school decided to open the dormitory to public student use. The building was about 30 years old. There were 16 rooms on the second, the third and the fourth floor. Each room was about four *Tatami* in size, just enough space for a single bed, a desk, and a closet. About forty students from mainland China lived in the Moon Residence. In December 2001, students in the Moon Residence were informed by the school that they would need to move out since the school needed the facility for its own students.

I befriended Dan soon after I moved into the Moon Residence as a regular resident. Since we came from the same geographic region in China, shared the same Chinese dialect and regional culture, I was able to establish a closer rapport with Dan than with other members of the Moon Residence. Dan and I met almost every night, mostly after midnight, to eat and chat after she came back from her part-time job. When I explained my research project to Dan and invited her to be my participant, Dan showed an interest and agreed to participate. She took me to her university, to sit in her classes, and to meet their friends, all of whom were Chinese.

Data collection

Living in the Moon Residence as a regular member and becoming friends with Dan enabled me to conduct complete

participant observation (Spradley, 1979) of Dan’s daily life. I kept field notes on my daily interaction with Dan. By visiting Dan’s school and by occasionally socializing with Dan’s friends, I was able to triangulate my data from participant observations.

I also conducted many hours of both formal and informal interviews with Dan. Formal interviews were recorded on tapes and transcribed. Informal interviews were in the style of a friend-to-friend talk and were recorded in notes at the earliest possible time I could find after our talks.

Interpreting Dan’s experience in Japan

As a novice qualitative researcher, during my first interview with Dan, I asked: How do you see your role in Japanese society? In what way do you think you are related to Japan? Dan appeared angry, and responded, “Don’t ask me that question! Why do you ask? I and Japan, Japan and I have no relationship. I’m just here to study. It (Japan) is just the place where I am attending school. (Interview, 2000/5/17) I still remember being shocked by her answer as well as her attitude.

Dan told me she decided to come to Japan since she failed to get into a good university in China. She came to Japan to look for a better educational opportunity hoping that this educational experience in Japan would lead her to a happier life. Dan came to Japan with zero Japanese language proficiency. After studying at a Japanese language school for a year and half, she got accepted into a prestigious Japanese university in central Tokyo. She cared about getting good grades, and she was very pleased every time when she got a compliment from her professors. Dan had a clear sense of herself as a capable individual.

Dan had no Japanese friends

I noticed that Dan had no Japanese friends. The following is a conversation I had with Dan about this topic.

Rui: *Ni haoxiang meiyou Ribenren de pengyou?*
(It seems you have no Japanese friends?)

Dan: *Um.* (Um)

Rui: *Weishenme?* (Why?)

Dan: *Women liuxuesheng meiyou jihui gen tamen zaiyiqi* (We foreign students have no chance to be together with them.)

Rui: *Nimen bushi you xuexiao huodong ma, xiang shenme “club”, shenme de* (Don’t you have school activities, such as club, etc.)

Dan: *Tamen yaoqingguo wo yici. Danshi wo buxiang qu. Tamen shuo GOSENYEN, bugui. BAKA! Ruguo wo qu, wo ARUBAITO jiudei xiuxi, na jiushi liuqian kuai. Wo yigong jiu deihua yiwanyiqian kuai. Jiu gen tamen zuozainar hejiu, xialiao. SUGOKU TSUMANNAI. Tamen you taba tama, wo quan dei kao ziji* (They invited me once. But I didn’t want to go. They said it’s 5,000 yen, not expensive. Stupid! If I went I would have had to take a day off from my part time job. That’s 6,000 yen. So, in total it would cost me 11,000 yen. And to just sit there drinking and chatting blindly with them. So boring. They have their fathers and mothers, I have to depend only on myself.)

Rui: *Na, ni jujue yici yihou, tamen jiu buzai jiao ni le?* (So after you refuse once, they didn't invite you any again?)

Dan: Um. (Um.)

(Interview, 2001/3/28)

It seems that financial hardship deprives Dan of opportunities to socialize with her Japanese counterparts. However, an underpinning assumption in Dan's decision making should also be noticed—that she preferred doing part-time job over the chance of going out with her Japanese classmates. It can be inferred that in Dan's mind socializing with her Japanese counterparts is not a necessary component of her life; or at least, the value of that particular dinner outing was less than 11,000 yen. Then, what made Dan not see the value of developing relationship with her Japanese classmates? I argue that it is because she could not see the possibility of her having a decent relationship with the Japanese people around her, and she could not see the tie between Japan and her future. Having no or very few Japanese friends is a common phenomenon among my other participants. It can be inferred that seeing their marginalized subject positions in Japanese social context deprived Dan and my other participants of interest in interacting with their Japanese counterparts. They position themselves as well as were positioned by the discourses in their social life as being alien to Japanese mainstream society.

Hardship in finding an apartment

In December 2001 we were required to move out of the Moon Residence. I accompanied Dan in her process of looking for an apartment. Many times after going through a careful process

of calculating the cost, when Dan decided to take one of her limited choices, she was refused by the landlord over the phone because of the fact that she was a foreigner. Dan was finally able to find a place she could afford and was accepted by the owner, but she was faced with a new problem: finding a *Houshounin*, an individual guarantor, who must be a taxpayer. Dan commented: As a *Ryuugakusei* (a foreign student), where do I go to find a guarantor? Dan's question voices a common condition of the majority of Chinese students in Japan, that is, they have no social ties with the Japanese mainstream society, and they live in isolated communities.

Dan finally got information from her Chinese friends that she could call some place and buy a guarantor—a Japanese person whom Dan had never met and would never get a chance to meet. Facing the “cold reality,” in Dan's words, she told me that she hoped to return back to China as soon as she finished her study, and she did not want to waste too much of her youth here.

Being born a Chinese...

I was really shocked when I heard about the following episode from Dan's experience at her workplace—a restaurant. She told me that one day during a break time, a Japanese co-worker, who was also a university student and a part timer, asked her:

CW: Dan, anata Chugokujin toshite umarete do omou? (Dan, what do you think about being born as a Chinese?)

Dan said she didn't understand his question at first. So, she asked him:

Dan: *Dou iu imi?* (What do you mean?)

CW: *Anata Chugokujin toshite umarete hazukashikunai?* (Don't you feel shameful being born as a Chinese?)

Dan said: "after hearing that I was furious, I fought back".

Dan: *Anata wa hazukashiku kanjiru beki. Datte, watashi tachi Chugokujin ga inakattara, anata gata Nihonjin tachi wa ima mada moji mo nai kamo yo!!* (You are the one who should feel shameful. Without us Chinese, perhaps you Japanese still wouldn't know how to write!!)

(Fieldnotes, 2000/10/9)

When I asked Dan where her Japanese co-worker's question came from, she told me that there was a news report of some Chinese crimes in Japan on TV that day and her co-worker's question was partially addressing that issue. Dan continued:

Wo zhidao zai Riben you yixie haide Zhongguoren. Zhe shi shishi. Danshi, tame jiu jue de Zhongguoren jiushi Zhongguoren. Zhongguoren doushi zuifan. Wo henshi zheige le. (I know in Japan there are some bad Chinese. It is true. But, they just feel all Chinese are Chinese. All Chinese are criminals. I hate it so much.

(Fieldnotes, 2000/10/9)

For Dan's co-worker, Dan was not an individual; rather, like all other Chinese, she was a *Chugokujin*, an essentialized Chinese in his view. Since there have been far more unpleasant stories than happy ones about Chinese reported on Japanese mass media, Dan, like many other Chinese students in Japan, had always been prepared to fight against the biased image

of Chinese in Japanese society. Since this negative image of Chinese in Japan was so contradictory to Dan's self-perception as being a capable young intellectual, her human agency was then activated to set up a counter-discourse to resist it.

Dan's interpretation of her experience in Japan

In talking about her experience in Japan, Dan said:

Wo zhishi yige liuxueshen, liuxue, zhidaoba, jiushi zhanshi zaizher, xuewanle jiuhui zou. Wo gen Riben, Riben gen wo meiyou shenme guanxi. Wo zhishi zai zher xuexi eryi. Shi wo xuexi de difan eryi

(I'm only a liuxuesheng—visiting student, liuxue—visiting learning, you know, this means I'm here for the moment, after I finish learning, I'll leave right away. I and Japan, Japan and I have no relationship. I'm just here to study. Japan is just the place where I am attending school.)

(Interview, 2000/10/7)

As demonstrated above, Dan's marginalized economic and social subject positions put her at the periphery of Japanese society. She was isolated as a *Gaikokujin*, a foreigner, in her daily and social life. She had been reminded all the time that she was a *Chugokujin* and lived under the concept of "Chinese" constructed by people in Japanese society. Her experience told her Japan was not a place for her.

Last year Dan graduated from her university, and returned back to China. She is now working at a branch office of a world-known Japanese company in Beijing. She told me she is really

happy with her life now. She is working with three colleagues with Ph.D's from an elite Chinese university. And she is their Japanese language teacher. I wonder how Dan sees the meaning of her experience of studying in Japan now. I hope I will find the answer to my question in my future interaction with Dan.

Conclusion

The desire of constructing a more successful self brought Dan to Japan. She valued very much the opportunity of studying in Japan and perceived herself as a capable individual. As a Chinese national, she was confined within all the discourses of being *Chugokujin* in Japan. She was offered subject positions that were against her own subjectivities, for instance, her own sense of herself as being a talented intellectual versus her co-worker's "essential" view of Chinese associated with crime; her conception of Japan as a place where she could construct a successful life versus a social environment in which she had been marginalized in all aspects of her life. Thus, Dan set up counter-discourses to fight back, and the experience in Japan became a social and emotional battlefield for her. It seems that Dan left Japan with no hesitation.

Dan's experience seems to correspond to a common saying among Chinese: Those who studied in Japan became anti-Japanese, or after Japan, Chinese became more patriotic. Lots remain to be studied in order to make the studying in Japan experience more successful and meaningful for both the Japanese society and the Chinese students.

Poststructural theories and approaches turn our attention to the marginalized social communities and lead us to examine the detailed and immediate situations of their social life. It is proving to be a powerful tool for me to interpret the Chinese students' experience in Japanese social and cultural context.

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