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Essentialisation and the Possibility of Hybridisation in Ethnic Schools: A Case Study of a Japanese School in Canberra

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Abstract

During the education of children of immigrants, friction sometimes arises between the hopes of parents who want to pass on their ethnicity to their children and pressures from the host society to integrate and create a hybrid culture. This paper aims to investigate the possibility of a balanced co-existence between these two directions. I carried out participant observation and interviews as a volunteer staff member over a period of about one and half years at the Canberra Japan Club Japanese School (CJCJS), an ethnic school managed by a Japanese immigrant organisation in Canberra. In the school, staff and parents carried out practices of cultural nationalism based on an essentialist notion of Japanese culture. However, they did not aim to make the students essential Japanese. The adults in the school recognised that hybridisation of students who are children growing up in Australian society is inevitable. Rather, they hoped that if they essentialised Japanese language and culture to the children now, the children would grow up as Australians who maintain partial Japaneseness in the future. When this 'time lag' between essentialisation and hybridisation is recognised, we can theorise about the possibility of their co-existence.

Introduction

It seems that the essentialist hope of first generation immigrants for passing on their ethnicity to future generations cannot co-exist with the hybridisation of culture in the host society. This is a key problem in cultural and language education for children of second and third generation immigrants.

Daniel Yon (1999: 39) suggests that this kind of education often categorises the in terms of ethnicity in such a way that neglects personal differences among second and third generation immigrant students, and the possibility of hybrid practices. However, Yon also suggests that recognition of the ethnicity of students through education can empower them for resisting and negotiating racism from the dominant group. Therefore, the educational practice of transmitting ethnicity by first generation immigrants, which is often seen as essentialistic, should not be so quickly rejected. Instead, we should seek a way to help it coexist with the creation of hybrid culture in the host society. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the possibility of coexistence.

Previous studies suggest that we should not regard essentialism and hybridity as existing in binary opposition. Rather, they should be recognized as different strategies of identification. For example, Greg Noble and Paul Tabar (2002: 134-7) suggest in their case study of second generation Arabic youths in Western Sydney that these youths have been hybridised in everyday practices at home and school, but they also sometimes operate strategic essentialism by using the ethnicity inherited from their parents to resist prejudice and discrimination against them. Therefore, educational practices by first generation parents for transmitting ethnicity to the next generation can provide cultural capital for their children to resist assimilation while the children become cultural hybrids. In this paper, I examine a case study of the Canberra Japan Club Japanese School (CJCJS) managed by the Canberra Japan Club (CJC), one of the organizations of the Japanese immigrant community in Australia. From May 2001 to September 2002, I carried out participant observation as a volunteer tutor in the school. The data analysed in this paper is from these observations and from interviews with teachers, staff members and parents of students at the school.

The 'hope' towards an essential Japanese culture

In May 2001, the CJCJS was launched as an ethnic school affiliated to the ACT Ethnic Schools' Association. They had a class for pre-school children (about five years old), and the class opened for three hours every Saturday morning in a classroom of a public high school. The original number of the students was 11. After its launch, the number of students increased to 16 and the school opened another class. The two classes were organized on the basis of the students' fluency in Japanese. In each class, a teacher and a parent acting as an assistant conducted the class with some volunteer tutors, of which I was one. Canberra has small Japanese community, about 500 people in the whole of Canberra and 200 members in the CJC (in May 2002). Therefore, before opening the school, members of the CJC assumed it would be difficult to recruit students. The reason why members of the CJC still wanted to open the school was their concern about their children losing their Japanese, arising from their wish to hand down the Japanese language to their children[1].

[1] Interview with Ms. A (August 22 2001) and Mr. B (June 15 2001), executive members of the CJCJS.

It is important to note that the people who established the CJCJS recognised 'Japanese culture' as essential. In a newsletter of the CJC, Ms. A, the president of the CJCJS asked parents to 'teach children children's songs and plays, and tell children legends and experiences to transmit Japanese culture, not to make it sleep' (*CJC Neusuretā*, May/June 2001). In her description, the 'sleeping' essence of culture is self-evident. Ms. C, a Japanese woman who was asked by Ms. A to become a teacher of the school described in the newsletter wrote, 'I think that the secret of the transmitting pattern of Japanese culture is hidden in the practice of "listening to instruction and imitating it"' (*CJC Neusuretā*, No. 24, July and August 2001). According to her description, Japanese culture has this 'secret' essence behind each practice. The descriptions by these women are typical essentialist 'cultural nationalism' narratives on Japanese culture. According to Kosaku Yoshino (1992: 1), 'cultural nationalism aims to regenerate the national community by creating, presenting or strengthening a people's cultural identity when it is felt to be lacking, inadequate or threatened'. The people who wanted to establish the CJCJS envisaged the school as a field where they implanted essential Japanese culture into their children. That is, it was a practice which aimed to realise their ideology of cultural nationalism in an expatriate community.

Integrating 'memories'

In spite of an underlying ideology of essentialism, there was no concrete consensus amongst teachers, staff and parents on which practices embody the 'essence' of Japanese culture. As a result, teachers re-constructed their own understanding of 'Japanese culture' based on their own memories of childhood and on this basis planned lessons. For example, Ms. C said, 'When I am dealing with small children now, I reawaken memories of my own childhood. ... I make my lesson plan according to what I once hoped and wanted[2]'. However, what they remember as 'Japanese culture' is, of course, different from each other. Ms. C is a woman in her 50s, and came from Tokyo. Ms. C's teaching plan included having the children make *origami* ('traditional' Japanese paper craft) every time, and reading them Japanese 'traditional' legends. Ms. C has been a teacher of *Kokugo* (Japanese as national language) in high school in Tokyo for about 20 years. She loves pre-modern Japanese literature and is attached to so called 'traditional' Japanese culture. As a result, Ms. C's view of 'Japanese culture' reflects her strong affection towards 'traditional' Japanese culture. On the other hand, Ms. D, another teacher, is a woman in her 30s. She was born in Hokkaido, in the northern tip of Japan. She has experience teaching Japanese as a foreign language to students who are not native speakers of Japanese outside Japan. Ms. D also said her teaching plan reflects her own memories of childhood[3]. However, in her teaching plan, many sessions included material not usually seen as a part of 'traditional' Japanese culture. Ms. D read Western style picture books written in Japanese to the children, and seldom used books based on 'traditional' Japanese legends.

[2] Interview with Ms. C (September 11 2001).
[3] Interview with Ms. D (February 8 2002).

There were also some discrepancies in the mode of memories on what is 'Japanese culture' between teachers, parents and volunteer tutors. The CJCJS introduces 'traditional' Japanese events in the curriculum. However, for example, memories of *Tanabata*, one of the most popular myths in Japan, were different between Ms. C and other adults. In a class in June, close to *Tanabata* day of July 7th, Ms. C said, '*Orihime* (heroine of the legend) and *Hikoboshi* (hero of the legend) meet by walking throughout the bridge made of *Kasasagi* (magpies),' and told parents and tutors she wanted children to make the decoration of *Kasasagi* for *Tanabata*. However, all the other adults, including myself, did not know her version of the *Tanabata* story. In another case, a mother was surprised to hear the *Kachikachi-yama* story, a popular legend in contemporary Japan, when a teacher read it to the children, because she had not known that version of the story. She felt it was 'very cruel' because in the story being read in the classroom an evil raccoon dog beats an old woman to death, and in the end the raccoon dog is killed by a rabbit. In her memory of *Kachikachi-yama*, nobody is killed.

However, these subtle discrepancies between memories of Japanese culture are not necessarily a significant problem in conducting classes, because the consensus about what is the 'essence' of Japanese culture remains vague among adults. Teachers always examine other teachers' plans and listen to parents' requests, and fine-tune their memories with others' memories. Ms. C does not have child education teaching experience, so she always mentioned requests from parents. Parents also provided her with teaching materials like illustrated books and music tapes of Japanese once used at home. When Ms. D took over Ms. C's class, she also kept Ms. C's teaching plan to maintain continuity in teaching. In addition, she worried her own memories of childhood were too specific because she was born in Hokkaido, and she always mentioned 'matching it to cultures of Tokyo and Osaka.' In this way, because the concept of 'essence of nation' is vague and shapeless, it functions to integrate different memories of adults into practices in the field of the CJCJS. That is, the CJCJS is a field where cultural nationalism is compiled from various memories of adults mediated by essentialism.

Keeping hybridity and the 'time lag'

The CJCJS, although established with the ideal of reproducing essentialist cultural nationalism, anticipated that it would be impossible to reproduce essential 'Japanese' through its activities alone from the beginning[4]. Teachers of the school told me about the difficulties involved with teaching Japanese to children who are gradually conforming to Australian society day by day. Ms. C said, 'I was really surprised that the children cannot memorise Japanese words,' and 'it is not possible to learn language in the classroom only once a week'. Ms. D also said, 'When I hear students speak English during the teaching breaks, I feel a little sad, because I find their basic mode of thinking is English, not Japanese'. The teachers' understanding was shared by parents of the students. Some parents said their children's fluency in Japanese was not maintained in the CJCJS as much as they had expected,

[4] Interview with Mr. B.

and thought it would be better if the school had two or three classes a week. However, they knew this would be difficult in terms of the school's finances and human resources.

Teachers, staff members and parents of the CJCJS thus recognize the difficulty of their project. However, they operate the school with eagerness because they share hope for a 'time lag': even though it is not soon realised, the children essentialise Japanese culture 'partially' when they become adults. Ms. D said, 'I do not hope they become perfect Japanese, because they live as Australians,' but 'they must have a different part inside from other Australians because one of their parents is Japanese. It might be a good part, or it might be a bad part.' The hope that children have a 'part' as Japanese but live as Australians is shared among the parents. Ms. F and Ms. H, mothers of the mixed students said it is 'natural' for her daughters to live 'as Australians'[5]. However, Ms. H said, 'Japanese is what I inherited' and 'I want to hand down what I know to her'. Ms. F told me the reason why she brings her children to the school eagerly, 'if I let my daughter learn Japanese, she might speak it well in the future even though she cannot learn it now.' As their narratives suggest, the reason why the staff and parents launched and operate the CJCJS, although they realise the difficulty of their project, is that the reproduction of the 'essential' Japanese in the short term is not their main purpose. Through teaching at the school, they aim to make the children memorise Japanese language and culture, and give them the basis to invigorate themselves in the future.

Ms. H's five year old daughter talks at home in Japanese with her mother and in English with her father, who is a Caucasian born in Australia. When Ms. H told me about an episode with her daughter, she looked very happy.

> Two or three days ago, my daughter said to me;
> Daughter: 'Mom, you will be a grandmother if I have a child, won't you?'
> H: 'Yes.'
> Daughter: 'So, I have to teach my child Japanese.'
> H: 'You are right.'
> Daughter: 'Otherwise, Mom cannot talk with my child'.
>
> But a few minutes later;
> Daughter: 'But you should speak English, Mom?'
> H: 'I might forget English when I become older.'
> Daughter: 'I see. I have to teach my child Japanese!'
> H: 'Please, please' (laughing)

Ms. H desires her daughter to maintain Japanese so as to keep a connection of language and culture between her daughter and herself in the future. What Ms. H imagines is a 'hybrid' life where her children and grandchildren usually speak English, but can talk to her in Japanese at the same time.

As described above, the adults in the CJCJS are actually worrying their children are assimilating to the dominant language and culture in Australia

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[5] Interview with Ms. F (February 16 2002) and Ms. H (February 22 2002), mothers of the student in the CJCJS.

when they lose Japaneseness. Therefore, they recognise their children live as 'Australians' but try to guard against assimilation and hold on to the possibility of them being cultural hybrids by transmitting a sense of 'Japaneseness' in their memories. In this process, 'Japaneseness' is reproduced from the memories of adults as an essentialist cultural nationalism, but when it is passed on to the children, the adults expect it will become 'hybrid' memories of the children living in Australia. Therefore, what happens in the CJCJS is actually the construction of memories of 'Japan' in essentialist mode, as well as maintaining the hybridity of children by 'decoding' essentialist memories into the dominant context of Australian society. They are producing 'essentialist Japanese culture' and keeping hybridity of the children at the same time. However, the adults do not fully realise this conversion as contradictory, because they assume this conversion happens in a 'time lag' mediated by memories. Their sense of 'time lag' means not only just a passage of time, but also includes the desire of the adults to keep a connection between themselves and their children; the hope to keep 'continuity of generations' as an 'Australian Japanese community.'

Conclusion

The analysis in this paper revealed the practices of the CJCJS which although aiming to maintain the essential Japaneseness of the children, actually provide the basis for the children's hybridity. Immigrants and their children come to Australia from various cultural contexts. Therefore, their everyday practices are hybrids within the context of the dominant Australian culture. However, in nation states like Australia, where institutional reproduction of the dominant culture is established, 'banal nationalism'[6] is reproduced through various symbolic mechanisms: the educational system, mass media, events and festivals, and flags and anthems. Therefore, immigrants' hybrid practices face continuous pressure for assimilation from mainstream values. In this context, the adults of the CJCJS try to pass on Japaneseness to the next generation. They are 'essentialist' practices from the viewpoint of the present, but at the same time, from the perspective of the actual hopes of the adults, which include an assumed 'time lag' in relation to the future, they are practices for keeping hybridity in the bodies of the children to resist the huge pressure of Australianness. The adults of the CJCJS are relying on the possibility that Japanese language and culture will be internalised into the children and 'partially' appear in the future by embedding their own memories into the children's memories. In these practices, 'essentialism' does not conflict with 'hybridity.' Rather, the essentialisation of ethnic culture from the synchronic viewpoint is equal to practices for improving hybridisation from the diachronic viewpoint.

The findings in this paper do not support the essentialist view of culture. It only suggests that we cannot always deny the essentialism currently prac-

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[6] Michael Billig (1995: 5-9, 37-59) proposes the concept of 'banal nationalism', which is a kind of nationalism represented in practices like flags, events, and anthems. According to Billig, in a state where a nation is already established to some extent, nationalism is reinforced by 'banal nationalism,' but at the same time 'banal nationalism' itself is not recognized as 'problematic.'

ticed in an ethnic group. Instead, we have to examine carefully whether current essentialist practices really function so as to make people essentialists, or they function to reproduce future hybridity through the everyday actions of people. Through the analysis of this 'time lag' in empirical case studies, it seems possible at least theoretically that the essentialist practices of first generation immigrants for keeping their ethnicity can co-exist with the production of hybrid culture in a society.

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Autobiographical note

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