

Feng-Bing

Ethnicity, Children & Habitus

Ethnic Chinese School Children
in Northern Ireland

Introduction

This book is concerned with the ethnic experience of Chinese secondary school children living in Northern Ireland. Here I consider the children in two sub-groups, namely, one with parents coming from Hong Kong and the other with parents coming from Mainland China. The division of these children into two sub-groups is not to represent a fact but used as a starting point. My purpose is to investigate if and how these apparently 'Chinese' children make sense of their ethnic experience in disparate ways. Further, drawing upon Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, Elias's notion of figuration and cultural studies' approach to ethnicity and identity more generally, I try to account for such cultural specificity and heterogeneity.

Research on ethnic Chinese young people living in the United Kingdom has generally focused on the Chinese community with a Hong Kong background. This background is often characterised by parents working in the catering industry. However, there has been relatively little work on the community with a Mainland China background (N.B. the community is steadily growing). This background often contains a feature of professional or academic parents. Therefore, in comparing the two sociologically and culturally specific sub-groups, I shall be particularly concerned to identify and describe the complexity and diversity of the 'Chinese' children, deconstructing the generalised, homogeneous notion of the Chinese community in the United Kingdom thereby.

In this respect it may be added that children's experience, ethnicity and development cannot be divorced from their specific historical and cultural milieu. Although there has been work on ethnic Chinese minority children living elsewhere in the United Kingdom, there has been virtually no research on different sub-groups of Chinese children in Northern Ireland. Therefore, my undertaking here is also specifically oriented to coming up with an understanding of the particular ethnic, and Northern Irish, situation. It is not the purpose of this project to compare and contrast the experience of Chinese immigrant children, but investigation

into the Chinese children in the Northern Ireland context is logically the first step.

Research on children, ethnicity and development has tended to emphasise sociological or psychological explanations. The detailed, symbolic ways, in which children creatively construct their reality and experience, however, seem to have received only short shrift. Therefore, in this book I shall be interested to find the ways that the children themselves *make sense* of themselves and the environment, *producing* cultural specificity and heterogeneity thereby. This means that I shall pay special attention to the ways that identity and relationship are constructed and practical purposes achieved. In other words, I shall highlight the children's ethnic experience as *interactional, discursive accomplishment*.

Beyond these more or less 'descriptive' aims, I have a broader concern. The experiential divergence of these 'Chinese' children needs an explanation. In this book I draw upon Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus as a theoretical perspective on discourse and hence individuals who use it. Habitus is that which embodies past experiences and internalised socialisation; it is so ingrained in individuals that it becomes part of the unconscious so to speak (see Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990). It provides resources for thinking and acting in particular ways. Accordingly, I try to illuminate the role of the parents' discourses in the children's experience as the latter's habituses by identifying their connection and consistency with the children's discourses. For example, the Chinese parents tend to have a negative image of China on the one side and their children tend to identify with the local culture on the other side.

In accounting for the two sub-groups' discourses and hence their ethnic experience, I also make use of Elias' (1978) concept of figuration. The centrepiece of Elias' figuration lies in the interdependent but power-oriented nature of individuals. For example, the Chinese children, their parents, their local peers, the wider British, Western culture are not in equal relationship with one another. This power relation can consequences for the way they make sense of their experience and reality. Accordingly, I try to highlight the role of the parents and hence the family in the children's discourses of ethnic experience by contrasting the habituses provided by the parents and other potential or real habituses in

the children's talk. For example, the children with parents from Hong Kong can have a variety of habituses and yet it is the habitus of 'hardships' in Northern Ireland provided by their parents that dominates the children's discourse and hence experience.

Apart from these sociological perspectives, I also appropriate some critical themes in cultural studies regarding ethnicity, identity and cultural politics (Ang, 2001; Bhabha's, 1990 and 1994; Tu, 1994; West, 1993). Here it is argued that 'race', culture and identity are neither natural nor homogeneous categories. Nor do they have an essential, 'real' existence. Rather they are diversified, hybridised and shifting. Moreover, they are practical and interactional achievements; that is, they are the results of members' situated symbolic construction. It is further argued that social cultural research should take upon itself the task and strategy to deconstruct racial and cultural stereotypes by exploring practical cultural experience and heterogeneity in particular. In the present undertaking, therefore, I am committed to identify and highlight the particularity of the sub-groups and hence the difference of the ethnic experience of the two sub-groups of the Chinese school children. Further, I am interested in showing such culture specific identities and cultural heterogeneity as the children's active symbolic construction.

Methodologically, I have attempted an ethnographic approach, in keeping with the current general tendency of cultural studies. On the one hand, I give central prominence to the definitions, perspectives and voices of the children themselves by conducting open-ended, in-depth and informal interviews and by doing so on an extended basis. I also place my analytical focus on these interviews and analyse them qualitatively and in relatively good detail. On the other hand, I have not designed, conducted and interpreted these interviews out of context; rather I have conducted participant observation, taken field notes and interviewed their parents as well. This whole process continued for two and half years. Thus in the present analysis I draw upon this contextual knowledge when making sense of and accounting for the children's talk. This exercise includes paying close attention to the children's immediate circumstances, their parental occupations and their general social and cultural conditions.

Now let me briefly describe the contents of the book. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the extant research literature on ethnic minority Chinese children and young people living in western societies in general and in the United Kingdom in particular. It registers a number of important contributions in the field. At the same time it identifies a set of areas as lacking research or needing more attention. Here three points may be noted. First, there has seemed little research on the in-group difference and diversity amongst the 'Chinese' children, particularly in the respect of ethnic experience and identity. Related to this, secondly, there has seemed scant detailed and qualitative investigation into the ways in which the children symbolically (i.e. discursively) and actively construct their experience and identity. Thirdly, little research has been done regarding the Chinese children in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 2 moves on to revisiting a number of theoretical perspectives to do with 'race', ethnicity and development. It critiques the essentialist understanding of such categories and issues on the one hand and endorses a post-structuralist understanding in terms of specific backgrounds, interactive situations and personal experiences. In particular, it discusses Bhabha's (1990 and 1994) concept of 'interstitial space', Ang's (2001) notion of 'living-together-in-difference' and Tu's (1994) 'changing' meaning of the Chinese and argues for an understanding of ethnic experience and identity in terms of cultural and developmental specificity and in terms of practical achievement. In close connection with this pluralist and practical understanding, further, it develops Bourdieu's theory of habitus by re-interpreting it as discursive resources, which group members draw upon in their verbal communication, and argues that such 'discursive habituses' play an organising part in people's linguistic-symbolic activity. In addition, it draws upon Elias' concept of figuration and argues that such discursive habituses are associated with particular social and cultural groups and therefore also saturated with power.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodologies and methods adopted in the present investigation. It starts by discussing several major methodologies and methods in the social sciences and moves onto spelling out a qualitative and ethnographically oriented approach to ethnicity, development and communication. Given the object and objectives of the present en-

quiry, it outlines the principles of research adhered to in the research process. This chapter also provides a detailed account of the context of the present research, the social, historical and cultural background of the informants under study and the specific techniques used in the research process.

The rest of the book presents analyses of different aspects of the empirical data. Chapter 4 focuses on the ethnic Chinese school children with a Mainland China background. It shows that the young informants organise interview talk around a variety of themes, such as the importance of education, problems of China, mitigation of prejudice, denial of ethnic difference. Further, it shows how these themes are used as rhetorical strategies to achieve and maintain forms of identification with or assimilation into the mainstream culture. In addition, it suggests how these themes form a routine and ‘unconscious’ complex of the children’s habituses.

Parallel to Chapter 4, Chapter 5 focuses on the interview discourse of the other sub-group-ethnic Chinese children with a Hong Kong family background. It identifies and characterises a set of dominant themes, such as racial discrimination, their bleak future in Northern Ireland and their positive prospects in Hong Kong. It shows also how these discursive repertoires or habituses serve to mark a separate identity and express alienation from the mainstream local culture.

Chapters 6 and 7 provide analyses of the broader figurational contexts in which the two sub-groups of children have produced their discourses of ethnic experience as described in Chapters 4 and 5. In this sense, the two subsequent chapters serve as an explanation for the children’s accounts. Here they pay special attention to the figuration represented by the two sub-groups of Chinese parents and the nature of the respective interdependent relationships that exist between the parents and children.

Chapter 6 delineates the historical, social, political and trans-cultural context of the parents from Mainland China and the interviews with these parents. Then it compares the parents’ negative discourse of China with the corresponding children’s interviews examined in Chapter 4 and shows a logical relevance and coherence between these two bodies of discourses. In this way, Chapter 6 functions as an explanation for the way their children make sense of ethnic reality and experience.

Chapter 7, similarly, describes the background of the Hong Kong Chinese parents in terms of their overall family environment and disadvantaged social conditions and their discourses of hardship of living in Northern Ireland. Then it shows the links between the parents' negative representations of their life in Northern Ireland and their children's talk as discussed in Chapter 5. Here again arises a similarity and consistency between the parents and the children in the ethnic experience construction.

The concluding chapter summarises the findings and their implications for the study of the ethnic minority Chinese children. I do not claim that the present research is representative of the experiences of the two sub-groups of children studied. I have only investigated a small proportion of these sub-groups and observed and interacted with them in a limited way. Nor do I claim that this study is thorough and comprehensive of the ethnic experience of the two sub-groups. I have mainly focused on the collective patterns of experience of the two sub-groups and on the difference between the experiences of these sub-groups. Surely there will be personal differences, gender differences, socio-economic differences, regional differences, etc. amongst each of the sub-groups and there will be a certain particularity of the Northern Ireland situation in the ethnic experience of the Chinese children. However, my main concern in this research is with the qualitative heterogeneity of second school children of the two Chinese ethnic communities in Northern Ireland.