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Bin Wang



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“Chinese Identity” as a Problem

WANG BIN

Cet article s’interroge sur les problèmes de langage lors de l’évocation d’une identité chinoise. Préconisant une approche culturelle relativiste, il s’oppose à une conception totalisatrice de l’identité qui rechercherait l’authentique dans l’intemporel. Se basant sur les usages différents de mots représentant la Chine et les Chinois dans des langues diverses, Wang Bing démontre que l’on ne peut exprimer de manière formelle la réalité complexe de l’identité collective chinoise.

Not long ago I got involved in a transcultural programme called “Keyword Project”. Each word, if presumed to be a key expression across conceptual boundaries between different linguistic-cultural communities, was to be explored separately in six articles by six contributors coming from six areas: China, India, America, France, Africa and the Arab world. The contributors were supposed to write in their own respective native languages. It was hoped that the project might help to create a shared platform where we could see how a more or less identical mental conception works in different linguistic contexts and consequently contributes to structuring or re-structuring their respective lifeworlds (*Lebenswelt*). For the benefit of “quality control”, however, all non-English presentations were to be translated into English first and, after their acceptance, from English into other languages for local publication. I was asked to focus on the term “identity” and to translate my own writing into English.

Identity as a key word immediately confronts me with a series of identity problems, epistemological as well as ethical in nature. First, I do not believe there exists something like “Chinese identity” which could transcend spatio-temporal limits and therefore apply to all those who happen to move in the world under the name “Chinese”. Secondly, as a transcendental signified motivated by a metaphysical desire or postulated for effective ideological manipulation, Chinese has manifested itself in various substitutes in the history of our intellectual/social/political life. They include Confucianism, the Kingdom of all kingdoms, Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy (the slogan of the May 4th 1919 movement), the proletariat, the Party, the people, tradition, socialist market economy, etc.. Different as they are in content, all these integrating forces have one thing in common: collective orientation. And this gives rise to another epistemological and ethical problem. No collective identity can exist in and of itself. It is always pronounced by empirical individual speakers in specific contexts and situations for specific purposes. Put otherwise, a certain society’s self-image or cultural identity is always a biased ideology proclaimed by those who have vested interests in some human/social relationships and power over other relationships, though it often goes by the name of “nation”, “country”, “religion”, “culture”, “the people”, etc.. The collective, in this sense, is silent and absent. Blind to the commonplace, one falls a prey to ideological manipulations. This problem of mine sounds very much like philosophical and moral relativism, which constitutes a new problem in terms of identification. Now, politicians, both in the West and in the east, have accepted the idea of cultural pluralism. But, insistence on cultural relativity may not only support the weak in their struggle against the invasion from what is called western normative imperialism. It can also disarm the legitimate challenge from abroad and even justify illegitimate, local authoritarianism by stressing cultural differences. This paradoxical nature of cultural relativism puts me in another dilemma when I try to locate what has caused terrorist attacks, the international/transcultural background against which I was considering the composition of my article about identity. In the light of cultural relativity, it is extremely difficult to make an either/or choice between Islamic fundamentalism and western value norms. It does not follow, however, that we should go back to essentialism or universalism. The terrorist attack is a wrong solution to the problem of the confrontation between diverse cultural identities, while the “War against Terrorism” cannot automatically remove the problem itself. It was with all these problems in mind that I managed to present an article under the title of “Identity as a Transcultural Problem”.

My deconstruction of the notion of collective identity disappoints my French collaborators. I can have some sympathy with this reaction: a collective French or European identity is indispensable in their competition with the American drive for cultural hegemony. Then, they project their own desire for a holistic cultural identity onto their expectations of other people’s self-image presentation and suggest that I should tell the European reader what authentic Chinese identity is. The stress is on the term “Chinese”. In a modified version of my paper I try to explain the linguistic reason for my hesitation in talking about Chinese identity. This additional part to the article might be interesting to both European and Chinese native speakers.

There exist several parallel expressions in Chinese that are significantly distinctive but homologized, through translation, into one English concept: “Chinese”. First, there exist two expressions with respect to language: 汉语 (*Hanyu*, literally “Han language”) and 中国话 (*Zhongguohua*, literally “China speech”). *Hanyu* refers to a language (*yu*) whose native speakers are called Han or Han people. By the way, I happen to be one of them. It consists of many dialects, some of which are mutually unintelligible in the spoken form but which share a single system of writing. Oral communication is impossible between two Chinese persons if one speaks Cantonese and the other Shanghai dialect. Put otherwise, if only in terms of the spoken form, *Hanyu*, a language used by over one billion people, does not really exist! To integrate all the incommensurable speech characteristics into an abstract totality defined as Chinese is a metaphysical desire or a linguistic ideal alien to the wisdom manifest in Confucianism or Taoism or Chinese Buddhism. *Zhongguohua* is the so-called standard language of the Chinese based on Peking dialect. It is the official speech of the People’s Republic of China, and, strictly speaking, is not a natural language in terms of modern linguistics.

The problem looms larger when one comes to another pair of concepts correlating, within the Chinese language, with the first one (that is, *Hanyu/Zhongguohua*). They are 汉族人 (*Hanzuren*, meaning “Han people”) and 中国人 (*Zhongguoren*, meaning “people of China”). A Han person can speak *Zhongguohua* (“China’s speech”, that is the standard Chinese based on Peking speech) if he/she is more or less educated. A *Zhongguoren* (one of the “people of China”) may not be able to speak “China’s speech” if he/she is from one of the many ethnic minorities. A native of Tibet is a *Zhongguoren*, though he/she is not a Han person: his/her non-Chinese native language has nothing to do with his/her political/national identity as one of the “people of China”. When it comes to English, the above subtle but important distinctions suddenly disappear. In English, “Chinese” is actually referring to the

Han language (Hanyu) when it is used to designate a language, automatically separating it from “Tibetan” and many other languages used by “people of China” whose native languages are not Chinese. The problem is that “Chinese” in English also means “a native of China or a descendent of the people of China” and, by working as an adjective, “of China, its people, language, or culture.” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, second edition.) The three senses are interrelated and cannot be separated semantically and hence politically. In the “prison-house” of the English language, one has to differentiate “Chinese” from “Tibetan” in the three senses altogether. It does not make a distinction between “Han people” which exclude Tibetans, on the one hand, and on the other “people of China”, which include both Han people and Tibetans. I dare to guess that Westerners as a whole share an identical inclination with respect to what “the Chinese” includes and what it does not. With all this in mind, the political implication of discussing the Chinese identity in English would be a welcome surprise to those who advocate the independence of Tibet but a shock to all the people of China. By analogy, one may well ask: are we supposed to ask a native of Scotland to represent something like the English identity which could help to differentiate people of the United Kingdom from all the others? This is a ridiculous question even at the linguistic level. It is easy to rectify the error, if one still insists on the idea of the collective in question, by changing “English” to “British”. Unfortunately, English as a system of signs denies to us (both Han and non-Han people in China) what it gives to its own people in Britain. Here is a problem of linguistic politics without a solution to which a discussion about Chinese identity would be dangerously confusing and confused.

A third pair of conceptions is created by the overseas Chinese: 中国文化 (*Zhongguo wenhua*, “Chinese culture”) and 华人文化 (*Huaren wenhua*, “Chinese people culture”). The separation sounds strange in English but proves important in Chinese. Those who live outside China and, most probably, are passport holders of any country except China, identify themselves with Chinese people’s culture. They designate the people of China as belonging to the culture of China. This bifurcation of Chinese culture, so to speak, helps the overseas Chinese to identify themselves with and, at the same time, differentiate themselves from what is generally called in English “Chinese culture”. On the other hand, it also facilitates the retention of Chinese tradition among Chinese communities throughout the world when they are faced with undesirable cultural assimilation in various foreign lands. A positive result would be a symbiosis through acculturation in a specific foreign country. It explains in part why Chinese communities abroad like to talk about Chinese identity and why they seem more patriotic than the citizens of the People’s Republic

of China. The political motivation behind the two distinct but correlated conceptions comes to light when intellectuals from both sides—“China culture” and “Chinese people culture”—agree on a new theme: cultural China as a bigger country. It attempts to integrate all kinds of Chinese culture both at home and abroad. Without any critical reflection, it might forge a certain kind of solidarity. As for the meaning of Chinese identity, it cannot help us much.

Last but not least is the Japanese expression for “Chinese/China” and the Chinese reaction to it. Two years ago, an international conference on comparative literature and culture was held in Guangzhou (Canton) during which something unexpected happened. Shigemi Inaga, my personal friend for many years and an outstanding scholar from the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan, came to me for help. He wanted me to explain to a Chinese professor from Peking the European counterparts of the Japanese words *Shina* and *Shinajin*. I stayed two years in Italy and have intellectual contacts in France. With my limited knowledge of European languages, I told my fellow-countryman that *Shina* corresponds to China, Chine (French) and Cina (Italian), while *Shinajin* to Chinese, Chinois and Cinese. Etymologically they are related to one another and it is said that *Shina* originates from Sanskrit. But I am not an expert in diachronic linguistics, and Mr. Shigemi Inaga knows that very well. “What is going to happen?” I asked myself. The Chinese professor said: “I don’t care about that! I only know that we don’t accept the term ‘*Shina*’ or ‘*Shinajin*!’” My Japanese friend retorted, “Why do you make allowance for Europeans and let them go on with those expressions?” I immediately realized what had happened between them. *Shina* and *Shinajin* were adopted by the Japanese in the middle of 18th century but became expressions of racial discrimination during the Second World War. The bitter memory is still fresh in the minds of the Chinese, even though many Japanese contemporaries like Shigemi Inaga do not use the two words in a pejorative way. As a result, the Japanese resort to a double linguistic/political policy: for the benefit of communication between China and Japan, any Japanese documents sent to the Chinese, either official or academic or commercial, must avoid those two undesirable signifiers. They have to depend on the Japanese *kana* to create another two words whose pronunciation sounds like the Chinese word 中国 (Zhongguo, that is, China). It is obligatory, because any written material containing “*Shina*” or “*Shinajin*” will be rejected by the Chinese side. But, on the other hand, the Japanese continue to use the controversial terms both at home and abroad as long as the communication does not involve the Chinese. Then, a discussion between the Japanese and the Europeans about “Chinese identity” will inevitably take *Shina* and *Shinajin* as neutral equivalents of China/Chine/Cina and Chinese/Chinois/Cinese.

Ironically, this would surely trigger off an identity problem on the part of the Chinese at a transcultural level. Personally speaking, I am not that sensitive. The derogatory connotation in *Shina* and *Shinajin* is a product of history. It is their actual meanings in the contemporary system of Japanese discourse, not the Chinese reaction, that determine their legitimacy or illegitimacy in the final analysis. Politically correct or incorrect in the field of cross-cultural communication is one thing; that the meaning of a word depends on its native speakers for explanation is quite another. The problem with the English expression “Chinese”, I hold, is much bigger. It is deep-rooted and still taken for granted.

Now I can sum up my argument. I refuse to discuss “Chinese identity”, not merely because we have had our own bitter experiences of the collective self-identity (the nation, the people, the proletariat, the Party, and so on, a series of political/ideological substitutes introduced from abroad) but mainly because the rule of the English language has already prescribed the meaning of “Chinese” in advance. As a mode of structuring, it shapes Reality into one meaningful world, among many other linguistically-shaped worlds, for English native speakers. The Chinese always remains the Other. Its semantic underpinnings reflect a western desire for constructing this Other according to the rules and needs on the part of the Self. To discuss Chinese identity in English, and it is the same in any other European languages, will result in anything but Chinese. Of course, the explanation of the impossibility of representing Chinese identity might have already suggested something Chinese. But, this “something”, as I have demonstrated in the above critique of the word *Chinese* or *Shinajin*, is not purely Chinese but cross-linguistic and intercultural.