Contestation as pedagogy in the complementary classroom

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Introduction
In the Dutch case study that was carried out as part of the IDII4MES project we investigated discourses of inheritance and identity in the Chinese community in and around the city of Eindhoven in the south of the Netherlands. There we observed that Chinese-Dutch youth are performing complex identity work in the various social contexts they navigate. They orient to and negotiate complex, multilayered identities and assert as well as denounce parts of their Chineseness and Dutchness in their everyday routines and practices, depending on the contexts in which and the audiences for which they stage their acts of identity.

We began to understand that identity and heritage is not something people have or possess, but something people do: we don’t have identities, but we identify with particular identity positions and disidentify with others. In our everyday routines we don’t just have or inhabit identities but (re)produce, (re)construct or (re)invent them. There is of course a large body of sociolinguistic, sociological and anthropological theory that has made this point before we did (see e.g. Kulick, 2003; Brubaker, 2002; Møller & Jørgensen, 2009; Street 1993 for differently disciplined but accessible introductions into such a science of identification), but in this short paper we want to provide ethnographic evidence for this claim and offer insight from a Chinese complementary classroom on what it means to learn (and) to be Chinese in the Netherlands. More specifically, we will present and interpret one of the many moments of conflict and contestation we came across during our fieldwork – a moment that richly illustrates the complexity and dynamicity of identities-in-the-making in the classroom. We will discuss how these moments, as painful and distressful as they may be as experienced by the teacher, are potentially and actually very rich moments of language learning as well as of cultural formation for learners in the heritage language classroom.

The complementary classroom
The moment we refer to here is drawn from a series of observations we carried out in 2010 in a combined grade 11 and 12 classroom in the HanTang Chinese school of Eindhoven. The school is a complementary school, i.e. a community-run school operating outside of the mainstream education system and offering a community-specific curriculum complementary to the mainstream educational contents. The classroom episode that we will analyse revolves around a teacher-led discussion following the learning of new characters and vocabulary and in class reading of a new text, a well-known Chinese folk story. This is part of normal classroom routine in the school that convenes every Saturday morning in the premises of a large mainstream secondary school. The school was established in 1978 to provide Chinese language education for children of the 1960s and 70s Chinese migrations in and around Eindhoven. The children’s parents are now typically more recently migrated “knowledge workers” employed by the high tech companies that are based in and around Eindhoven or earlier established entrepreneurs in the catering and restaurant business. They have various regional and linguistic family backgrounds.

On the Saturday in November 2010 when we observed the discussion of the story, there were eight students present, aged 17 to 20. Four students, Ming, Xin, Qiang and Dan are university students in Tilburg or Eindhoven. The remaining four, Tao, Mei, Hong and Yuan attend pre-university secondary schools. The class is very heterogeneous. Xin, Mei and Qiang are of third generation Hong Kong Cantonese background; their home language is mainly Dutch. Hong, Yuan and Ming are of respectively Wenzhou and Fuzhou backgrounds and have Wenzhounese and Fuzhounese as their main home language (see Table 1). Tao, who is the central character in this classroom discussion, is a 1.5th generation migrant from Beijing and of Mandarin language background: his parents came to the Netherlands in the 1990s to pursue postgraduate university education and settled in Eindhoven after they completed their studies. They both worked as researchers at the High Tech Campus Eindhoven. Table 1 below summarises the educational and ethnolinguistic diversity in the classroom at the moment of our observation.
### Table 1: Grade 12 class of Eindhoven Chinese school (October 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>role, name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>age</th>
<th>place of birth</th>
<th>(parents’) home town</th>
<th>home language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tao</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Fuzhou</td>
<td>Fuzhou and Zheijiang prov.</td>
<td>Fuzhounese and Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Dutch, Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Dutch, Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qiang</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Dutch, Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Fujian</td>
<td>Dutch, Fujianese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Wenzhou</td>
<td>Dutch, Wenzhounese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Wenzhou</td>
<td>Dutch, Wenzhounese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Sun</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Fujian</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The class teacher, Ms Sun, had been engaged in teaching at the Chinese school in Eindhoven for more than ten years in various classes. Born in Fujian province in the late 1950s, she experienced the political turbulence and the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as well as the Economic Reforms of 1978. Ms Sun completed a university degree in Beijing in the mid-1980s and moved to the Netherlands with her husband as he was pursuing his PhD degree in Eindhoven in the early 1990s.

On the first day of the new school year, she told the students to speak only Chinese in class: questions could only be asked and answered in Chinese, i.e. in Mandarin or Putonghua. Our classroom observations suggest that the students “translanguaged” (Creese and Blackledge, 2010) a lot between varieties of Chinese and Dutch and were all very interested and committed to learning Chinese. They made efforts to address the teacher in Putonghua on most occasions, wrote their notes in a combination of Chinese and Dutch, and talked with their peers before and during classes more exclusively in Dutch. The teacher encouraged the students to speak Putonghua most of the time, but did not enforce this in a very repressive manner, thereby keeping a pleasant and interactive atmosphere in the classroom.

**“The Song of the Little Brook”**

The text that was discussed in our classroom is a well-known Chinese folk story, *The Song of the Little Brook*, which was written in 1959 during China’s Great Leap Forward campaign of the Communist Party that meant to transform China into a modern communist society through the process of rapid industrialisation and collectivisation. Folk stories are productively used as heritage texts in complementary education throughout the world, and are applied to “endorse traditions, values and beliefs, and to invoke features of the collective memory of community” (Creese, Wu and Blackledge, 2009: 363). As such, folk story literacies often have a clear ideological and political message.

This text tells the story of a personified little brook that never runs dry but sings and runs through the landscape day and night without stopping, and playfully and cheerfully finds its way over pebbles and rocks, grasses and branches without ever taking a rest. The brook resists various challenges from a dead branch and dry grass, a crow and a rusty iron boat to take a rest or stop running, but tirelessly continues running day and night without ever stopping. It becomes bigger and stronger as other brooks join him, turns into a little stream and ultimately a big river that flows into the boundless, happy blue sea. Throughout its infinite existence, the brook is happy and smiles and melodiously sings. The story culminates in the coda “never stop to take a rest, never stop running!” The growth of the little brook is meant as a metaphor for the socialist revolution and construction of China, praising hard working and achievement.

It is this story that is printed in the textbook as educational material for Chinese children in the diaspora half a century later. This, perhaps unsurprisingly, is causing some contestation in the classroom. The text as printed in the textbook (first two pages) is reproduced below, followed by a lengthy edited transcription of the classroom episode discussing the text.
The Song of the Little Brook as printed in the textbook

The teacher’s reading contested
After reading the text together in class and explaining new characters and vocabulary items, Ms. Sun opens a discussion on the meaning of the text as a whole.

Ms Sun: 这样一篇文章，大家有什么感受？
Tao: 我没有什么感受。
Ms Sun: 没有感受？没有feeling？
Xin: 没意思。
Ms Sun: 没意思啊？他用，就用东西写成人啊，拟人化，对吧？
Tao: 不一定。

Such a text, what do you think of it? Tao, how do you feel about this text?
I don’t have any feeling.
No feeling? No feeling? Such a text, what does it tell us?
Nothing.
Nothing? It personifies things, personification, right? It personifies the brook, the brook works very hard, never takes a rest, running straight to the sea. In fact, it is just like the life of people. From the moment you were born until you die, the experience of our life is just like the brook, understand?
Not necessarily.

This is how the classroom discussion begins: Ms Sun asks her class how they feel about the text. This occasion is taken by Tao and Xin – teenagers – to sabotage the class event: they do not cooperate with the teacher and claim to have no feelings at all about this text, and assert that it doesn’t tell them anything. The teacher’s interpretation of the moral implications of the story – more or less in the spirit of the Great Leap Forward – stressing the value of hard work as a good way of life, is rejected by Tao.
Ms Sun 一定不？他讲要一生努力，直到你闭眼睛的那一天，就这意思。不可以停留，懂吗？

Tao 我不那个[ 下-me een？Hehe…不同意我的意见，ok，

Ms Sun 你讲你的意见。Ja，

Tao 你做你想做的事。

Ms Sun ((smiling)) 那小溪也是做得想做的事，想去大海。他

Tao 你做你想做的事。

Ms Sun ((smiling)) 那小溪也是做得想做的事，想去大海。他

Tao 你做你想做的事。

Ms Sun 对，那就更难，那就对你来说更难，但是他

Tao 不一样。

Ms Sun 听不不一样？它想去大海。他的目标很明

Tao 不一样。

Ms Sun 对，他就更难，那就对你来说更难，但是他

Tao 你做你想做的事。

Ms Sun 看，看，看，

Tao 你做你想做的事。

Ms Sun 是能去大海。我们不知道我们往哪儿走？

Tao 但那个小溪呢，一个朋友都没有，走个

Qiang 但那个小溪呢，一个朋友都没有，走个

[Tao keeps rejecting the teacher’s interpretation of

Tao 假说写你在某个公司打工，就是你的carr
ière。你在最下面开始，就是小溪嘛，就一

Ms Sun 对，一生努力。

Tao 但在这种情况下呢，就有比如说小溪，大

Ms Sun [但是你要和别人合作，你没发现？跟别的

Hong Je moet niet vast houden om te winnen.

Ms Sun 他只是讲他的mening，he。

Tao 对，对，对，

Ms Sun 对呀，是被社会淘汰了，

Tao 我觉得不够努力就会被淘汰，我觉得这个

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Tao 假说写你在某个公司打工，就是你的carr

Tao 假说写你在某个公司打工，就是你的carr

Let’s put it this way: you work at a company, your

career. You start from the bottom and you are the brook,
you climb up, work and work, then you become the sea,
you climb to the top, and you still need to work hard.
Right?

Yes, you should work hard in your entire life.

But in this case, the brook, river and sea are all himself,
so he is=

=but you need to cooperate with other people, don’t you

You shouldn’t stick to win.

He only talks about his opinion, eh.

Yea, yea, yea, but the fishes and shrimps couldn’t catch
up, and then they will be forgotten.

Right, they are dropped off by society, by environment.
Things are often like that, right? So if you do not work
hard, you will be eliminated.

I think if you do not make great efforts you will be

ambitious, only aimed at having "a comfortable

life". The story illustrates how one should lead
one's life: "work hard, pursue and explore". This
is questioned by Qiang, who remarks that in such
a life there is no time for friendship or enjoyment

Not necessarily? He tells us that people should always
work hard until the day you die. Do not stop,
understand?

I don’t= don’t agree? Hehe…don’t agree with me, okay, then
tell us about your opinions. Yea, what kind of life do you
want? You just want to be like the Dutch, have a
comfortable life?

You do what you want to do.

((smiling)) The brook also does what he wants to do; he
wants to go to the sea. Doesn’t he mean the same?

Yes, so it is even more difficult, even more difficult for
you, but one point to be stressed is that you should
always work hard, pursue and explore. This is how you
should lead your life, right?

But that brook, he doesn’t have a single friend. He flows
without stopping. He can't stop to play.
every individual should decide what he wants, not everyone wants to, wants to rush to the top, to win, because most of the people will fail, only a few can come to the top, then the people who fail will be very unhappy, is it? So if you fail, let it be.

Ms Sun 什么是输，什么是赢，定义都不一样。

Tao 你没爬到上面你就输了嘛。如果我们班上8个人，加上你，都争取考第一名，考试考第一名，当然只有一个，这种情况下那只有一个第一名，其他7个就要输了。

Ms Sun 他只是说，你不要不断努力，刻苦才会有进步。

Tao 中国人要勤劳，太过分了。

Ms Sun 我觉得荷兰人不努力了。

Tao 荷兰人比中国人efficiënt。中国人是没办法。

Ms Sun 中国人在全世界都很努力。

The dispute becomes more serious. Tao is now no longer just sabotaging, but actively interpreting the story. He begins to build an argument that there is more in life than just hard work and that such a life can be a lonely life. Hong reprimands Tao for being too headstrong; Ms. Sun, however, defends Tao (“He only talks about his opinion, eh”) and thus encourages her non-submissive student to go on. Tao brings in the fish and the shrimps who are unscrupulously left behind as the brook becomes a river and a sea. Ms Sun responds that life is like that, "if you do not work hard, you will be eliminated." Tao continues his case: in a class of eight, only one can be the best, which would leave seven losers if life is only about winning and being the best. For Ms Sun, everybody can be a winner in something, if only you work hard. The discussion also explicitly turns to national categories again as they argue about Chinese and Dutch values: for Ms Sun, “the Netherlands makes people lazy”, whereas for Tao “Dutch people are more efficient than Chinese.” Ms Sun and Tao take up opposite ideological positions on their shared “bicultural identity” (see e.g. De Korne et al. 2007) of Dutch-Chineseness.
We are only learning a text, a thought, but we should have a goal, work hard in our life, make efforts, make progress, keep doing this, non stop. In the past, we didn’t have money, we didn’t have money when we were in China, we="

I’m talking about contemporary China, contemporary China is just like this. If you have money, then you want to make more money. Eh, if people in China hadn’t worked hard, hadn’t wanted to make money, then China would have been like Africa now. I don’t mean that they don’t want to make money, but I mean they can’t get enough of it. I think there is certainly enough. Aren’t you one of the Chinese who feels he has enough, enough to make a living? My way of thinking is Dutch.

Eh, China was poor, but when people have enough material things, then they have less desire. But anyway, Chinese people ought to work hard. That’s too much.

I feel that the Netherlands makes people make too little effort. The Netherlands does well. For instance in research development. This is only for the talented people. Those who have no talent will be a waste.

Dutch efficiency is better than the Chinese efficiency. I feel, I feel, I do not feel, I feel every coin has two sides. If people in China didn’t work hard, I think China wouldn’t have made such remarkable progress in the last years, right? Chinese are not really hard-working, Chinese have no choice.

No choice ((smiling))

In China, those people in Guangdong, the workers who work in the factories. If they don’t work, they won’t have money for living. So they have no choice.

Chinese all over the world work hard.

We learn a text, a thought. And it tells us that people should work hard. It is not wrong. People can’t just sleep all day and do nothing. It tells us that you should make efforts and progress.

[Students chat with each other in Dutch]

Speak Chinese!

((Bell rings))

Conclusion

While the teacher seemed to believe that teaching “language” and “culture” through folk stories was a means of reproducing “Chinese” identity in the young people’s minds, the imposition of such Chineseness was explicitly challenged and renegotiated in the classroom. The students assertively considered themselves Dutch citizens fully participating and entrenched in Dutch
culture and society, and rejected the deeper metaphorical meaning and moral lesson embedded in the story. In the discussion with the teacher, however, they showed a thorough and confident understanding of China and Chinese culture in its historical context. The teaching of “heritage identity” through national fairy tales and folk stories here is contested and subverted. Being Chinese-Dutch is not a wholesale package of identity that one subscribes to all inclusively. It is rather a repertoire of identity options of which some parts are compulsory and little negotiable and yet others are chosen and replaceable. There are degrees of Chineseness, Dutchness and other-nesses with which one can identify. Some of these identity options require long-term planning, investment and serious commitment, such as becoming literate in Chinese and learning the standard or school variety (Putonghua). Rather than assuming that young people’s identities would necessarily be “dual” or “hyphenated”, we consider that people articulate a whole repertoire of inhabited and ascribed identities and that they do so by means of a complex display and deployment of cultural resources. The learning of Chinese language and literacy in the complementary classroom generates a particular set of resources, allowing the organization of different micro-identities. Thus while the teacher sees the classroom as a site to introduce and reproduce the traditional Chinese values to her students, these students contest the teacher’s imposition and upscale the traditional Chineseness into a new diasporic Chineseness that is enriched, “complemented” by their Dutch- or Europeanness. Tao and his classmates are not merely displaced Chinese subjects, but also Dutch kids who are born in families with transcultural migration backgrounds, receiving their mainstream education in and through Dutch. As a result, they embrace some Chinese cultural and linguistic resources, and reject others.

So much is clear from the above interaction in the classroom: students are learning here. They are learning much-valued skills of reading comprehension, discussion and arguing. They learn to make sense of their transnational heritage, and – although this is not the goal of Ms Sun – they do so in a critical way. And in case this has gone unnoticed, the entire discussion has taken place in lexically rich, sophisticated Mandarin Chinese – the fruits of their complementary educational career. They manage to express complex thoughts and engage in a lively discussion in Putonghua – not a home language for most of the students, except for Tao who is also most articulate in this episode, both in Chinese and about his Dutchness. For all the students, this is an excellent opportunity to practise their Chinese and to make use of all the linguistic resources at hand.

What we observe in this classroom interaction is an example of implicit intercultural discourse. Ms Sun tries hard, though in vain, to instill a sense of cultural Chineseness in her students. She does so by trying to convey a historically situated interpretation of an old folk story to her students without paying attention to competing discourses on Chinese identity, as articulated by Tao. Although Ms Sun and her class share a Chinese background, the way in which they interpret their Chineseness varies considerably. As such, they adhere to traditional, collectivist Chinese values and work ethos on the one hand, and contemporary Western values of self-determination, individual career development and leisure on the other. These different perspectives, whether intended or not, as we have seen, create a fruitful platform for language learning. Contestation about the contents of teaching can therefore function as a very productive pedagogy in the complementary language classroom. Bringing this to the awareness of teachers might be a first step in developing relevant and responsive pedagogies for educating children of transnational families.

References


