

## 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)

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

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



## 小溪流的歌

小溪流有一支歌，是永远也唱不完的。

一条快活的小溪流哼着歌，不分日夜地向前奔流。太阳出来了，太阳向着他微笑。月亮出来了，月亮也向着他微笑。小溪流一边奔跑，一边玩耍。他一会儿拍拍岸边五颜六色的卵石，一会儿摸摸沙地上才伸出小脑袋的小草……有巨大的石块拦住他的去路，他就轻轻跳跃两下，一股劲儿冲了过去。什么也阻止不了他的奔流。他用清亮的嗓子歌唱，山谷里总是不断地响着他歌唱的回声。回声也是清脆的，叫人听了就会忘记疲劳和忧愁。他来到一个拐弯的地方，那里有一截枯树桩，还有一片枯黄的草。他们看着活泼可爱的小溪流奔流过来，觉得很奇怪。枯树桩劝小溪流歇会儿，枯黄的小草请小溪流留下来。可是小溪流看着他们笑了笑，说：“为什么呀？就不！不能够停留！”一转眼小溪流就把他们抛在后面了。他又不停地往前奔流。

小溪流就这样不知疲倦地奔流，奔流，渐渐又有些别的

小溪流来同他汇合在一起，小溪流长大了，长成一条小河。小河欢快地歌唱着，不分早晚地向前奔流。他兴致勃勃地推送着木排，托起沉重的木船向前航行，什么也阻止不住他的前进。前面有石滩阻碍他，他就大声吼叫着冲过去。乌鸦看见小河总是这样活跃，这样匆忙，觉得很奇怪，就对小河说：“嘿，还是停下来吧，前面没有什么好玩的！”小河没有忘记自己原来是小溪流，他笑了笑，又不停地往前奔流。



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## 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？  
涛涛，你有什么感受？

Tao 我没有没什么感受。

Ms Sun 没有感受？没有gevoel  
？它这样一篇文章讲的是什么意思？

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？拟人，然后写小溪流呢，他非常努力。从不休息，从不停留，直奔大海。其实写得，其实写得，跟人的一生差不多，是吧？你自从你生下来到你死，经历地就跟他经历地差不多。懂吗？

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 不一定？他讲的要一生努力，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[
- Ms Sun [不mee eens? Hehe... 不同意我的意见, ok, 那你讲你的意见。Ja , 你要什么样的生活？你想像荷兰人一样, 舒舒服服的？
- Tao 你做你想做的事。
- Ms Sun ((smiling)) 那小溪流也是做想做的事，想去大海。他跟你意思不一样吗？
- Tao 不一样。
- Ms Sun 怎么不一样？它想去大海。他的目标很明确。他只是把它拟人化。看，看，看，他是能去大海。我们不知道我们往哪儿走？
- Ms Sun 对，那就更难，那就对你来说更难，但是他有一点就是要不断努力，不断探求，不断探索。这才是你的一生，对不对？
- Qiang 但那个小溪流呢，一个朋友都没有，走个不停，不能停下来去玩。
- [...]

Tao keeps rejecting the teacher's interpretation of the story and the dispute is lifted to an intercultural conflict, with the teacher impersonating traditional Chinese values and Tao constructing a Dutch attitude, which is characterised by the teacher as not sufficiently

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

- Tao 假说就写你在某个公司打工，就是你的*carrière*。你在最下面开始，就是小溪嘛，就一直慢慢往上爬，一直在努力，爬到大海，爬到最顶上，还是得努力。对，是不是？
- Ms Sun 对，一生努力。
- Tao 但在这种情况下呢，就有比如说小溪，大河，大海都是他自己，就是他自己那个]
- Ms Sun [但是你要和别人合作，你没发现？跟别的小溪流合作，你才能够生长。
- Hong Je moet niet vast houden om te winnen.
- Ms Sun 他只是讲他的*mening*, he.
- Tao 对，对，对，但比如说那些小鱼，小虾那些，就把他给丢了，没跟上。
- Ms Sun 对呀，是被社会淘汰了，被环境淘汰了。常常是这样的呀，对吧？所以说你不够努力你就会被淘汰。
- Tao 我觉得不够努力就会被淘汰，我觉得这个写得不是特别好。因为每个人应该自己决
- 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 know? Cooperate with other streams, so that you can grow.
- 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 eliminated, I think this is not very well written. Because

- 定自己想做什么，不是每个人都要，冲到，往上冲，每个人都要赢，因为最后大多数人是要输的，就个别赢，不是每个人都想，很多人都要赢，就有人不幸福了。这样输得他们就会不幸福，是不是？而输的又怎么，你输了就输了。
- 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 Nee, nee nee, 你这个就是狭义的想法。我们班呢，他当然可以考第一名，他在他的专业里头，你也可以考第一。他在他的economie里头，你也可以考第一，在你的法语里，不同的啊。各有各的发展方向，各有各的定义，不同的啊。
- [...]
- Tao 有的人努力也输啊!
- Hong Je hoeft niet altijd te winnen.  
Tao Dit artikel signaleert dat, als je niet tot de top komt, dan ben je verloren. Als je, ondertussen, afgehaakt, dan wordt het negatief beschouwd, zeg maar.
- Ms Sun 他只是说，你要不断努力，刻苦才会有进步。
- Tao 中国人要勤劳，太过分了。
- Ms Sun 我觉得荷兰太让人不努力了。
- 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。
- [...]
- 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.
- What is winning, what is losing, the definitions are not all the same.
- If you didn't climb to the top, then you have lost. If all the eight people in our class, including you, all want to be number one in the exam, but of course there is only one. In this case, the other seven will lose.
- No, no, no, your thinking is very narrow. In our class, one can, of course, be number one in his field. And you can also be number one. He can be number one in *economics*, and you can be number one in your French. Each has its own directions of development; its own definition. It's different.
- For some people, even if they try hard, they will also lose!  
*You don't need to always win.*  
*This article signals that if you don't reach the top, you are lost. If you, in the mean time, drop out, it is like considered negative.*
- He just implies that you should make great efforts, work hard, then you will make progress.
- Chinese ought to work hard. That's too much.  
I think that the Netherlands absolutely makes people lazy, makes people make no efforts.  
Dutch people are more *efficient* than Chinese. Chinese have no choice.
- Chinese all over the world work hard.

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

- Ms Sun 我们只是学一篇文章，一思想，一生当中有目标，一辈子总是要努力，不断努力，不断进步。一直要坚持做，不能停下来。过去我们没钱，我们在中国的时候没钱，我们
- Tao [我说中国现在，中国现在就是这样子的。有了钱想更多的钱。
- Ms Sun 呃，中国要是不努力，不想挣钱，现在就跟非洲一样。
- Tao 不是不想挣钱的意思，就是你没个够。
- Ms Sun 我觉得特有够。你不是就是中国人中挺够，觉得够生活就够了。
- Tao 我的想法是荷兰人的想法。
- Ms Sun 呃，因为中国很穷，当人的物质一定丰富的时侯，人的欲望就会少了。但是中国人要勤劳。
- Tao 太过分了。
- Ms Sun 我觉得荷兰的那个，太不让人努力了。
- Tao 荷兰做的也不错。比如说那个research development。
- Ms Sun 这是有talent的人才去做，没talent的人就浪费掉了。
- Tao 荷兰的efficiency 要比中国的efficiency好。
- Ms Sun 我觉得，我觉得，我没觉得，我觉得各有利弊，什么都是各有利弊呢。如果中国没有这么勤奋的人，我看中国这几年也翻不了这么厉害，对不对？
- Tao 中国人也不是勤奋，中国人是没办法。
- Ms Sun 没办法((Smiling))。
- Tao 中国广东那些人，那些在工厂打工的人，如果不给他们干，就没办法，没钱吃饭，那不是没办法。
- Ms Sun 中国人在全世界都很努力。  
[...]
- Ms Sun 我们只是学一篇文章，学一思想。他告诉我们人的一生都要努力。这个没错吧。总不能天天躺着不做事吧。他只是告诉我们你们要努力不停的往前走。  
[Students chat with each other in Dutch]
- Ms Sun 讲中文！  
(( Bell rings))
- 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))

The whole discussion around the Song of the little brook culminates in Tao's claim that his "way of thinking is Dutch." Contestations and negotiations on the interpretation of the story ran through the entire discussion, which point at the different cultural frameworks the teacher and students respectively applied in making sense of this old Chinese folk story.

### 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 othernesses 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.

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