
Learning to be Chinese: The Cultural Politics of Chinese Ethnic Schooling and Diaspora Construction in Contemporary Korea

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In this dissertation, I examine the particular diaspora construction of the overseas Chinese in South Korea focusing on their educational practice, and looking at how it relates to and reflects their identities and subjectivities. The Chinese in Korea, or Korean huaqiaos, have no parallel in that they still retain Chinese (Taiwanese) nationality despite their over one hundred years of settlement in Korea, and in that most opt for full-time Chinese ethnic schooling with exclusively Taiwanese-administered curriculum and support. Different from the previous discussions arguing the nation-making role of the state-sponsored mass education through transmitting national culture and language, in a Chinese high school in Seoul, Korea, I observed that ethnic schooling worked to connect the scattering Chinese in Korea as a community by letting them share similar social, legal, and cultural conditions. Drawing on school documents, student writings, and interviews and discussions with ethnic Chinese students, teachers, parents, and related organization leaders, I elucidate the role of their ethnic education which is transforming as a strategy to deal with one of the most

Abstract:

brutal social qualification-college entrance- in Korean society, and as a symbol through which they can remain Chinese diasporans. Students' indifference to their schoolwork seems to defeat expectations of Chinese heritage transmission, or the making of allies for the ROC. This situation results from changes derived from the Taiwanese political changes against them, and also from the conviction passed down over generations about the futility of hard work due to their minority situation in Korea. Even being aware of their ethnic schools' failure to properly educate their children in Chinese language and culture, almost all Korean huaqiaos keep sending their children there, unable to resist the immediate admissions advantage foreign high school graduates gain in entering Korean universities, and not wishing to be excluded from their own ethnic community by not attending the same ethnic schools. The way Korean huaqiaos deal with their ethnic education is a typical example revealing their collective characteristics they themselves talked about – “opportunistic”, “gossip-bound”, or “not stepping forward to act” - and I analyzed these self-defined particular Chineseness has been formed while they have gone through continuous unsteady socio-political processes. Through chapters that provide analyses of the historical Korea-China relationship, the context in which Chinese came to settle in Korea, and the ever-changing three-way relationship among Korea, Taiwan and mainland China, I discuss how Korean huaqiaos have formed and transformed their nationality, emotional and cultural belonging, and their unstable legal and social statuses as non-local nationals. This study on the atypical results of Chinese border-crossing and of ethnic education is based on three years of ethnographic field research in the Seoul Chinese High School and in other various social and cultural arenas of the Chinese community in Korea. And it offers a contextualized study of Chinese diaspora which contributes to debunking a generalized and reified imaginary of Chinese, and an ethnographic account of diaspora educational practice which also calls for a new concept of citizenship in this ever-globalizing era.

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