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The Reflection on Cultural Orientation of Ethnic Education Research

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Abstract

Cultural relativism provides theoretical base for multiethnic and multicultural equality. Research on ethnic education has also been carried out. However, the features of cultural relativism like relativity, closure, and lack of purpose prevent the communication, as the nature of culture, between different cultures. Therefore, to avoid it, the researchers are supposed to turn the attention to reinforce the cultural communication, value cultural pluralism, and hold to cultural awareness.

Key words: Ethnic education research; Cultural relativism; Cultural orientation

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INTRODUCTION

China is a country with masses of ethnic groups, and the Han is the main nationality. Different ethnic groups coexist equally, which is also the basic policy of China. From the distribution of nationalities, fifty-five ethnic minorities occupies 8.14% of the population, covering 63.8% of the area, and most of them are located on the

border of the country. Therefore, in terms of size, the development of ethnic minorities is a significant indicator to measure state's comprehensive development. In terms of the area inhabited by minority people, the country remains harmonious and stable on the premise of the peace and comfort in the minority autonomous region. Since the founding of New China, especially since the implementation of reform and opening to the outside world, the country attaches great importance to developing the minority region so that a series of favorable policies have been formulated, hoping that the prior development can provide driving force and support for the social development in an all-round way. Within this context, the research on the ethnic education has gained enormous and rapid progress. From the statistics, more than 80% of 1573 academic dissertations, published on Ethnic Education Study in the ten years (2004-2013) are concerned with cultural relativism.

1. CULTURAL RELATIVISM: THE ROOT OF ETHNIC EDUCATION STUDY

Contents and methods of ethnic education research are chose to realize its ultimate aim, that is, the protection of multiculturalism and the cultivation of sense of national identity. In terms of theory, on the other hand, cultural relativism plays a leading role in ethnic education research.

1.1 The Origin of Cultural Relativism

With the view of the evolutionary anthropology, the classical theory of evolution, greatly affected by Darwin, believes both the creature and the society evolve within natural law's limits. As a result, various minority cultures develop in the same path and different forms and levels of cultures, as a matter of fact, coexist in the diachronic changes. Eventually, different cultures' merits and demerits are visible, which results in the cultural

communication theory. According to it, the reason why the society and culture change is that the material culture and the system of behavior can spread from the original society to others. That is to say, compared with creating, cultural development relies on cultural communication. Due to the communication, advanced culture exerts a great influence on the backward culture. But the interaction between cultures is based on the fact that they are not equal.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, after the reflection of the classical evolution theory and the communication theory, scholars represented by Boas founded a new school—the historical particularism. Teaching at Columbia University, Boas has cultivated numerous excellent anthropologists, built an academic circle, in which he is the center, and produced important effects on anthropology. Moreover, he raised the idea of cultural relativism and ethnic equality.

1.2 The Conception of the Cultural Relativism

Boas believes that “the cultural history means the ethnic specific history instead of the general history all over the world because every culture has its unique history with features and laws of development different from others” (Xia, 1997). Cultural values matter only in the light of ethnic groups. Therefore the relativity is the nature of culture. The uniqueness culture carries remains the foundation of cultural value and dignity. Therefore, there is neither lowliness nor nobleness in culture, because everyone can construct and explain his own principles of experience by his background, events, and the understanding of social norms, which will also influence his sense and evaluation criterion as a result of no single and uniform social value to measure.

When studying heterogeneous culture in depth, researcher should not be shackled by his cultural background. Only by carrying out a further research on each culture on the basis of own culture and having a deep understanding of each nationality and putting every findings about cultural value people have made into consideration and studying objectively and scientifically will the research be available. Those studies in which researchers keep superiority of own culture and try to exclude other culture turn out to be meaningless.

1.3 The Pursuit of Cultural Relativism

The cultural relativity by Boas provides a theoretical base for national equality and softens the nation-superiority. In *Anthropology and Modern Life* and *The Mind of Primitive Man*, he strongly refutes the prejudice that the white races are born superior to members of other races, and he also explains that the reason why physical and intelligent quality of people in backward ethnic groups are inadequate is that the prejudice holders don't get into ethnic practical life. What's more, he believes that it is the historical and social factors rather than biological factors

at birth that cause the different levels between ethnic groups so the difference rests only on features on the surface.

Although it is not a standard to evaluate the culture, the difference of cultural development level indicates that it is necessary to show the uniqueness of different ethnic groups in various living conditions and in historical evolution and that varied ethnic cultures should be attached to existence and great values. Therefore, from the perspective of cultural relativity, different cultures' coexisting is essential and practical. In a multi-ethnic country, if the mainstream culture is taken into account, the effect of ethnic culture would be weaker, which would reduce the opportunity of survival of it and threaten the cultural pattern of coexisting. It can be therefore said that cultural relativity “is more than a category of methodology for the study of anthropology; it is actually becoming a worldwide cultural ethos worth promoting and it can provide a theoretical base for current ethnic education research” (Liang & Fang, 1997).

2. REFLECTION ON CULTURAL RELATIVISM

What has been confirmed is that the great change from the Euro-centrism to cultural relativism and from cultural relativism to cultural diversity tends to be a powerful riposte to Cultural hegemony. However, when the value of cultural relativism are reflected, it is reasonable for cultural relativity to survive because that the existence of it can just be regarded as an opposition of the cultural universalism (absolutism), which can definitely explain the rise of irrationalism that results from dictatorial rationalism. “They actually are in the same level, which is no more brilliant or constructive than each other” (Zhang, 2007).

2.1 The Relativity of Cultural Relativism

Absolute and *relative* is a pair of concepts in philosophy, and they rely on each other and are based on each other's existence. Therefore, when it comes to cultural relativism, the absoluteness of culture cannot be ignored and neglected. Cultural relativism has taken the discourse power into consideration, which has a significant effect on the protection to ethnic cultural diversity. In spite of this, the methodology with a conception that people cannot see the wood for the trees still makes people trapped because of people's blind arrogance and superstition to self-cultural validity as well as shelter to invalidity. Hence, “when carrying out the study on the cultural relativism, researchers are supposed to focus on not only the relative difference and unique characteristics within multi-cultures but also the similarities or generality between them” (Li, 2007). Otherwise, the reinforcement of relativism will inevitably bring its absolutization. In that case, the refutation of absolutization will get mired in itself

eventually. Thus, relativism then became the murder of ending their lives.

As a consequence, cultural relativism can never be exaggerated unlimitedly. Serving as a theory, the cultural relativism is not applied unless *cultural bottom line*, often regarded as *cultural principle* with a universal and absolute nature, is adhered to. Cultural relativism, covering the advantages of sustainable development, has been cultivated in human's daily life. In addition, it has been turned into a kind of *cultural recognition* and *cultural knowledge* so as to guide people's life. They play a certain role subtly, which is called the absolute culture.

2.2 The Closure of Cultural Relativism

From the view of cultural relativism, ethnic culture can be described as a *self-sufficient* organized whole, in which various cultural elements are being formed as an interactive or interconnected organizational system. The ethnic educational study under the influence of this conception sticks to cultural diversity and relativity or particularity and nationality. Considering the current situation, however, elements in any culture are not static, and its combination modes tend to change. The fact that the cultural original system is related to the life indicates that culture is opening its door to accept other culture's elements.

Essentially speaking, traditional ethnic culture depicts its overall scene towards ethnologic life. In the process of communicating and integrating with the universal system, different nationalities or areas have produced relatively different cultural systems, which are born with characteristics distinct from each other. In particular, when referring to specific cultural elements such as local customs, marriage, funeral rites and basic necessities, and so forth, it is seen that different nationalities have their own preferences, which also provides a reasonable argument to cultural relativism.

However, if these cultural elements are taken into consideration from a historical perspective, it is found that the relative culture is gradually changing. The most certain thing is that almost all cultures are in the process of changing except that elements connected with religion are unchanged. The reason for this is partly due to the creation of culture itself; but the comparison of external culture is the most important one (Ma, 1997).

Therefore, suppose that ethnic culture is observed from the perspective of cultural relativism, and its research is conducted only from this angle, the nationality and ethnic culture would actually be bundled as a unity, which would impede culture's development and destroying advantages of protecting cultural diversity that is regarded as the original goal of the ethnic education research.

2.3 The Lack of the Cultural Purpose

What is culture? Simply speaking, it is a life. Actually, cultures derived from elevated life experience aim at

enriching the practical life. Consequently, cultures are not merely a description that lingers on the book, but are concerning goals that human should pursue in social life. Wendeerban assumed that "the motive power of culture is absolutely a pure egoism" (W. Wendeerban, 1993). Human's history is one that men are continuously seeking a better life, and the better life, in turn, is a cultural history.

According to Qian (1952), the culture can help people achieve the pursuit of happiness on three levels: survival, peace, and transcendence. Survival means meeting human's material needs; peace means the harmony among interpersonal relationship; transcendence means the safety of spirit and soul of human. People have right to compare different cultures and make a judge or choice for the sake of achieving these goals. And, cultural relativism avoids, or partly rejects, to some extent, the purpose of culture. For example, although national religion can protect their local people's soul, some customs such as "anthropophagy" or "taking hatred or betrayal as a virtue" and so forth, should not be considered as a cultural idea for modern people. Therefore it is meaningless when cultural relativist assumes that foreign culture is irreplaceable within certain areas and groups by comparison and judgment with a presupposition of *neutral value*, because they avoid the fundamental aim that culture can provide people in minority areas with an approach in the pursuit of a better life.

3. A BLENDING: THE SUPPOSED TENDENCY OF STUDY ON ETHNIC EDUCATION

Having a gaze on the cultural relativism is to maintain the patterns of multi-cultural symbiosis. Rather than building a strong barrier for different cultures, the co-existence of culture has endowed a right to multi-culture, aiming at caring for cultural right of equality as well as the right of dialogue based on it. Only in this way, a reasonable tension could be developed to make the communication across different cultures possible. Therefore, the tendency of the study on ethnic education should not be limited to a single culture but should be from a more broaden horizon.

3.1 Culture Spread: From the Relativity to Popularity

Culture has a nature of transmission. Dating back to its birth, culture had a similar way of transmission like the human gene, which is "NiZi" as Richard Dawkins called. "The diffuse of culture is like genes in the gene bank, which jumps from one body to another with the help of eggs and sperms. NiZi in the NiZi bank also transforms from one mind to another" (Dawkins, 1999). During the process, culture can be transformed in different generations and the ethnic identity obtains the deserved

recognition, which belongs to the transmission of culture in chronologic order. On the other hand, the process helps the transmission of culture in the space, which is a two-way selection, acceptance and the reconstruction of the native culture and the alien culture. Thus, the opposite culture system gets the popular values after absorbing the elements of the alien culture.

Therefore, to discover characteristics of ethnic education and to dig out the value of education in the study on ethnic education are not the basic goals but a simple departure point. Taking the distinguishing feature, value, and protection of the ethnic culture as a starting point, it should be transformed in a broad dimension to make alien people reflect, judge, and accept this kind of culture and education with purpose. In this way, the value of the ethnic education can be shown completely. At the same time, the process can help the ethnic culture reflect, develop, and get the distillation of its meaning.

3.2 Culture Interaction: A Reduction of Cultural Boundary

The concept of intersubjectivity put forward by Lacan is a resist of dualistic theory of subjectivity and objectivity. The subjectivity creates a same environment for the object and itself. In this way, people can get a state of transparence in their own activities. During this process, people and their object can become the mutual subjectivity, which brings people back to the natural state. Then, the relationship between human beings and objects, human beings and human beings can build cultural relationships, which can introduce the concept of culture interaction. The culture interaction refers to that when two different cultures meet each other, one of them does not regard the other one as an alien culture but pays more attention to the reconstruction of the cultural elements. Since two different kinds of culture can only understand the other one from its own ground and their differences will lead to the inconsistency of understanding, the blending of their visions will be the absolute results. The result means a blending of culture and the reduction of culture boundary. The cultural interaction regulates that researchers should understand alien cultures from their ground and they should also introduce the crashes and dialogs between different cultures, looking at the culture and the development of culture dynamically and completely, which should be the demand of study on ethnic education.

3.3 Cultural Awareness: A Surpass of the Relativism

Based on the investigation in the rendezvous of minority nationality and out of the worry for its survival and the preservation of its culture, Fei Xiaotong put forward the

concept of cultural awareness, “which means that people living in a certain culture should be conscious of their own cultures and their history, characteristics as well as the trend; this kind of consciousness can strengthen the modern existence and adapt to the independent position in new environment and new time” (Fei, 2010). To put it in a simple way, cultural awareness is not only conscious of its advantage but also conscious of its disadvantage. Therefore, cultural awareness is far from the relativism, which is a transformation from *self-center* to getting rid of self-center. Based on this, cultural awareness demands people that they should have a conscious and deep reorganization, an understandable attitude towards the alien culture as well as an adoration to the multi-culture communication. Therefore, only enough trust of ethnic education awareness can dig out the value of ethnic culture and strength the boundary of ethnic culture, as well as providing a new opportunity for the alienation and assimilation of ethnic culture.

CONCLUSION

From cultural relativism to the reflection of cultural relativism, the cultural orientation of ethnic education research has shifted from symbiosis to a blending. Of course, this is not throwing off the possibility of the cultural symbiosis, but protecting the patterns of multi-cultural symbiosis from the perspective of interaction, communication, and accommodation.

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