Article

A Political Approach to China's Confucius Institute: An observation of its understanding of ethnicity, language and identity

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Abstract

In this paper, I will examine the ideas of the Chinese government regarding concepts of ethnicity, language and identity. This examination will provide clarity by which to estimate the direction towards which Chinese government policies are committed. Particularly, this research will focus on the language policy pursued by the Chinese government through the Confucius Institute. In this sphere, I will research the activities and specifics of the Chinese government's language policy conducted both internally and externally in order to understand the whole aspect of its language policy. After analyzing the connection between these activities and the specifics of the Chinese language policy, I will finally extract and summarize the characteristic features of the Confucius Institute as the external language policy instrument of the Chinese government.

要旨

本稿は、中国政府側の対外中国語普及の巨大プロジェクトである「孔子学院」の政策的な性格を明らかにするものである。それを明らかにするために本稿では「民族」「言語」「アイデンティティ」という概念に着目し、国内言語政策におけるそれらの概念に対する中国政府側の姿勢の分析を行う。分析により言語政策が有する国内と国外との固い結びつきが発見される一方、その発見により国内言語政策から孔子学院の実体も解き明かされる。

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will examine the ideas of the Chinese government regarding concepts of ethnicity, language and identity. This examination will help clarify and provide the means for an estimation of the direction of Chinese government policies. More particularly, this research will focus on the language policy pursued by the Chinese government through the Confucius Institute. In this sphere, I will research the activities and specifics of the Chinese government's language policy conducted internally and externally in order to understand the whole aspect of its language policy. After analyzing the connection between these activities and the specifics of Chinese language policy with consideration given to the history of development regarding external language policy, I will finally extract and summarize the characteristic features of the Confucius Institute as the external language policy instrument of the Chinese government. I believe this research could provide a theoretical framework by which to measure not only China's language policy but also that of any other given country's policies.

2. Political approaches to language and language education

According to E. J. Hobsbawm (1990: 71-79), languages in the modern era in Europe were regarded as symbols of the nation, in the same manner as were religion and the holy icons of the middle ages. Hobsbawm continues that, a community called 'the nation' which is based on localism is just an arbitrary group based on the support of the inhabitants of its small territory. But, from the late nineteenth century, that community was transformed into a polity which had the ability to control power. Furthermore, the meaning of nationalism was emphasized for the unity of the nation. In the process, the common linguistic and cultural features of a group were practical methods of identifying each group. Especially the written language and its education played a main role in emphasizing nationalism and reproducing the nation (Hobsbawm 1990: 113-114). Hobsbawm summarized the character of linguistic nationalism with the phrase: "At all events problems of power, status, politics and ideology and not of communication or even culture, lie at the heart of the nationalism of language" (Hobsbawm 1990: 110).

Concerning the strong connection between a common language and nationalism, B. Anderson (1991: 67-82) took the examples of some countries which had used the 'National Print Language' for unifying the country's administrations and A. Gellner (2006: 42-48) remarked on the role of language as a substitution for religion. Such understandings of language and the purpose of language education gave society the opportunity of reproducing effectively. Particularly the intervention of politics in language education was taken for granted as a legitimate method of unifying the state and the nation (Gellner 2006: 49-59).

R. Schmidt (2006: 98) analyzed the power concerning language and political intervention in language as having two directions. One is the politics of unifying the state by opting for an official language, and the other is the politics of identity which proclaims the right of minority communities to their languages as W. Kymlicka advocates. These two directions have conflicting features. In short, the politics of identity were undertaken to refute the concept of unification through the designation of one official language. In this manner, the politics of identity rely mainly on the ethnicities, cultures and languages of minority communities in order to emphasize their diversity. For example, S. Hall (1991: 59), who supports the politics of identity, stated that it was tailored to the needs of minority communities in obtaining the right of speech in public spaces. S. Hall continued to say that the concept of identity was not essential but constructed[1]. In other words, from his concept of identity, states and nations are not inherent and unchangeable, but accidental and strategic (Hall 2001: 11). Besides the controversy whether identity is essential or constructed, the concept of identity has another problem in relation to the existence of group-identity, i.e. in the case where the existence of group-identity is admitted, forcing the members of that given group to act only for the survival of their group is justified. Actually such actions justified by group-identity are inclined to ignore the diversity supported by respective members of a given group. It seems that the politics of identity is a contradictory concept, but there lies an important point. That is, even though the politics of identity advocate the identity of minorities, it denies the strong connection between identity, culture, and language. In short, the politics of identity strategically adopt the concept of identity only as a counteraction against the power of the identity of the majority. When the politics of identity emphasize the identity of minorities, it attaches great importance to the cultural and linguistic features of minority communities. This is the reason why these factors are easily regarded as the core of identity. With regard to this point of view concerning culture and language, I would like to refer to the comments of the sociolinguist T. Yasuda. Yasuda (2006: 130) briefly explains the connection between culture and

language as "the integration of culture and language". In order to explain the position of language transformed into an important factor of identity, Yasuda took the example of culture. He suggested that, after the meaning of culture had been changed for use as an important factor of identity, language became sub-categorized as one of the factors of culture. Through this process of integration of culture and language, language becomes one of the factors of identity. Yasuda also follows the understandings of scholars of cultural studies who maintain that the meaning of culture needs to be understood as going from one specific and essential feature of group-identity to a wide and general understanding including customs, lifestyles and so on (Yoshimi 2003: 24). Scholars of cultural studies usually use the term 'cultural turn[2]' and urge for a change of meaning of culture. In the same context, W. Kymlicka (1998: 89-92) insists on the cultural rights of minorities, including the right to freedom of speech and expression in their own mother language and the right to transmit their language to their children.

These understandings of ethnicity, culture, and language support the common idea that such concepts are not absolute. However, in the case where these understandings cling to the essential idea of ethnicity, culture, and language, they may oppress the rights of minority communities. From this point of view, action towards ethnicity, culture and language can be an index by which to understand the ideas the actors rely on. Especially the legal actions of a government can show which understanding of ideas that government bases itself on. For example, the proposal carried out by the Canadian government which admits to organizing an unbalanced federal system on behalf of the linguistic minority of French-speaking inhabitants, clearly shows which understanding of ideas the government is based on, even if such actions also have another underlying meaning of guarding against the country's separation (Tsuji 2007: 55) .

Based on this point of view, in the next chapter I will analyze the understanding of ethnicity, culture, and language held by a specific government.

3. Understanding ethnicity, culture and language: the case of the Chinese government

In this chapter, I will take a concrete example of a government and analyze this government's understanding of ethnicity, culture, and language. This attempt to evaluate the understanding of the given government will help in the evaluation of specific government projects. Particularly when the case is related to ethnicity, culture and

language, the understanding of a given government has important meaning. In this paper, I will examine the understanding of the Chinese government and, finally, I will conclude with an evaluation of the Confucius Institute, a huge project designed to diffuse the Chinese language abroad by the Chinese government with the stated goal of solely promoting mutual understanding. For this approach, I will mainly examine previous research documents in which prominent scholars have analyzed the historical phenomena and events proclaimed by the Chinese government after its establishment.

3.1 Understanding from the internal policies of China

In this section, I will present evidence regarding Chinese government strategies to achieve national unity, first, by neglecting the political autonomy of minorities, second, by using nationalism as logic for national unity and third, by economic policies.

I will cite one of the most prominent scholars of Chinese studies, Kazuko Mori. Mori (1998) tried to analyze the aims of policies launched by the Chinese government in her writing *Seeking China from the boundary: the problem of ethnicities and state*. Mori took examples from China's law institutions in treating the rights of minority communities, particularly the right to autonomy of minority communities. The Chinese government still propounds respect of minority communities' autonomous rights as if it admits these rights. Mori's analysis, however, clearly shows that the autonomous rights of minority communities in China do not include self-determination and federation, which are agendas the Chinese government promised during the Second World War. Mori explains this gap happened for three reasons. Firstly, she insisted this was nothing but a propaganda slogan in order to obtain the cooperation of minority communities. Secondly, the situation was different to that of the Soviet Union which the Chinese used as a model. And thirdly, the Chinese government had stressed nationalism all the way through right from the invasion of imperialism (1998: 43-44). To sum up, the Chinese government had no concrete plans to transfer the rights of self-determination and federation to minority communities. The slogan was an unrealizable but strategic propaganda approach with which the Communist Party of China gained the full support of the minority communities in order to beat its political rival of the time, i.e. the Chinese Nationalist Party. The third reason also explains that nationalism had already started to strengthen its hold as the logic for the unity of Chinese society.

With regards nationalism as logic for the unity of Chinese society, Mori (2001) states that the Chinese government adopted nationalism as a logic of anti-imperialism from the period of the organization of the Communist Party of China. Also she pointed out the recession of nationalism in China after the period of 'Chinese economic reform' and insisted that such a situation caused the crisis of social unification (2001: 34-38). Against this crisis of social unification, a new logic was created in order to reform the identity of China and to strengthen the social unification of China by the Chinese researcher, Fei Xiaotong. Fei (1988) argued that the term *Zhonghua minzu* refers not only to the unity of the fifty-six officially recognized nationalities (*minzu*) living in China, but also to the countless ethnonyms recorded throughout the annals of China. Mori criticized Fei's thesis because this kind of reforming identity is nothing more than a process of transforming ethnicity to nationality (1998: 75-79, 2001: 30-32). To cite Mori directly: "There may exist *Renmin (People)* as a political identity and *Zhonghua minzu* as a cultural identity in China, however, there does not exist Nation *(Guomin)* " (1998: 82). Finally she concluded that "Frankly speaking, China as a Nation-State is still in the process of Nation-Building".

In addition to Mori's analysis of China's nationalism as logic of social unification, the China researcher Ke Wang, suggests another logic in social unification (2006: 273). Wang pointed out the change in the central government's policies from grants-in-aid to direct investments for infra-structure in the autonomous districts of the minority communities. Wang explained that the central government was positive towards building market-based economic systems in the autonomous districts, and was convinced that such steps for China's economic unification would promote social unification[3].

3.2 Understanding from internal policies of language and language education in China

This section will further the research of the previous section, particularly in respect to language. First, I will cite the studies of China's language policy examined by Masataka Okamoto (2008). Okamoto started his work by verifying the general appraisal that 'Chinese policy to minority communities is superior', and examined the examples of several Chinese minority communities, including huge communities of Mongolian and Korean peoples as well as some smaller groups. He reached the conclusion that four factors caused the decline of minority languages. They were: 1) the influence of the Cultural Revolution; 2) the movement of populations (inflow of majority, *Hanzu,* and outflow of minorities to cities); 3) the decline in ethnic-language schools (Chinese

language *Hanyu* education is supported by the education system including entrance examinations); 4) the purpose of guidance division (Okamoto 2008: 172-181, 252-255, 342-345, 477-482). Apart from point 1) the historical event of the Cultural Revolution, it is easy to see that points 2) and 3), i.e. movement of populations and decline in ethnic schools are directly or indirectly connected to point 4) the purpose of guidance division. In other words, it is evident that the movement of population and the decline in ethnic-language schools were the intentional consequence of the purpose of guidance division. Particularly, intervention in the education system of ethnic schools is an inevitable consequence of guidance division. To sum up, these factors show that Chinese language policy was used as a method of social unification.

L. J. Calvet (2010: 240-244) agreed with this opinion. Calvet pointed out in his *La guerre des langues et les politiques linguistiques*, that education of Pinyin functions as a new inscription used for social unification. This means that the situation forces people to learn Pinyin as a new unified language system. Calvet (2010: 178) stated that the government project for training official interpreters from the languages of the minority communities to standard Chinese (*Putonghua*) was nothing more than standard language education for minorities, as almost all the applicants for the project of training official interpreters were minorities.

However, in his conclusion, Okamoto makes an important point regarding ethnic language education in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. He points out that in the case of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region the tendency is slightly different to his overall conclusion[4]. Okamoto predicts that this situation will change in a few years in line with the change seen in other ethnic languages (2008: 396). This particular situation gives an important clue as to the connection between internal language education and external language education. If language education is limited to internal language education, Okamoto's explanation is probably to the point. However, in addition to his conclusion, I would suggest the issue of external language education be taken into account. When it comes to the language situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, there are two main characteristics. One is, as Okamoto pointed out, that the situation needs to be resolved for the social unification of China. The other is that the situation is almost the same as that of a foreign country[5], the area is, as it were, a huge foreign territory within the country.
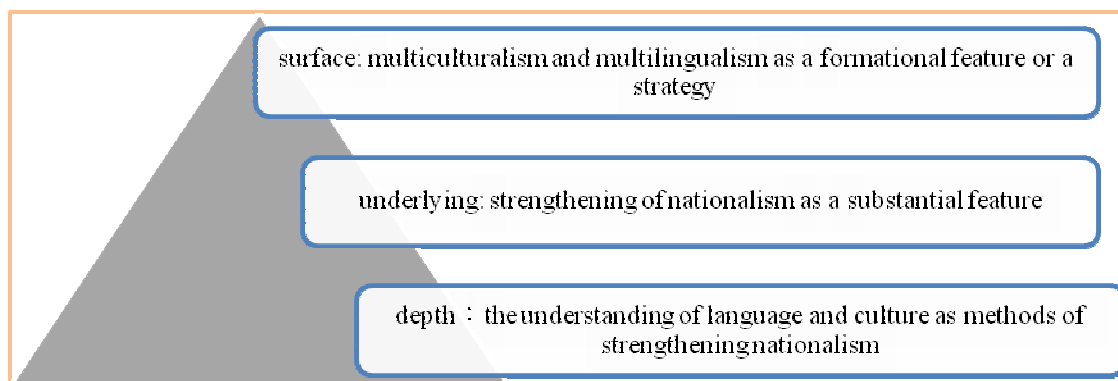
Put another way, the language policy towards the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has the two functions of social unification of China and of test trial for Chinese language education abroad. Even Okamoto described this as "full-scale enforcement of Hanyu education from 1984 to 1988 (2008: 393-395)"; 1984 was the year that the authorized Chinese language test HSK (*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi*)[6] was developed and 1988 was the year that the Office of Chinese Language Council International (*Hanban*) was established (Cheng 2005: 89). That is to say, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has great potential to be understood not only as 'the object required to be unified with China[7]' but also 'the object selected as a trial for the diffusion of the Chinese language business[8]'. The fact that these two aims are carried out in parallel shows that external language education is an extension of internal language education and that it is possible to represent internal nationalism as a country's identity projected towards the outside word.

3.3 The understanding of Chinese government

From these analyses, an unexpected formational feature of these policies became apparent. That is, the formational feature is similar to multiculturalism and multilingualism. The reasons are, firstly, the Chinese government accepts that concepts of ethnicity and identity are something created, however, it denies the multi-identity of *Hanzu*, a majority group in China. Secondly, it accepts the collective autonomy of ethnic minorities while denying self-determination of minority communities. These two limitations clearly show the major outline of what the Chinese government seeks to achieve. In other words, these two limitations work to emphasize nationalism. For example, Wang (2006: 276-279) commented that one of the characteristic features of the revised bill of 'the law of minority communities' autonomous districts in The People's Republic of China' on 2001.2.28, is the emphasis on nation rather than ethnicity. And Wang takes as example the fact that the Chinese language (*Hanyu*) became a common language among minority communities through the financial and administrative support of the Chinese government.

Another researcher, Minglang Zhou (2004) who studies the rights of minority communities, insists that the present law regarding minority communities and enacted by the Chinese government is not in the spirit of the Chinese constitution, nor does it relate to human rights and the language rights of minority communities as collective rights (Zhou 2004: 78-81). Zhou concluded that the aim of the language policy carried

out by the Chinese government was to establish *Hanyu* as the single authoritative common language. This was to circumvent movements of independence by minority communities relying on their languages, as happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The final objective of the Chinese government in establishing one authoritative common language is not only to strengthen nationalism but also to achieve social unification through such strengthening of nationalism. Based on these opinions, I will describe below the possible concept of language held by the Chinese government.

surface: multiculturalism and multilingualism as a formational feature or a strategy

underlying: strengthening of nationalism as a substantial feature

depth : the understanding of language and culture as methods of strengthening nationalism

Fig.1. the concept of language and culture (3-layered structure)

The formational feature is highly important in the policy of the Chinese government. The problem is that this formational feature is not understood as the first step in multiculturalism and multilingualism but understood as a situation to be fixed. Simply put, the formational feature functions as wrapping paper to screen the real aim. Generally, this situation appears in all countries wavering between social unification and multiculturalism. However, in the case of China, there is only the concept of modern nation-state and national interest gained from protection of its borders.

4. The understanding with two characteristic features of China's language policy

In this chapter, I will consider the history of developments regarding external language policy, highlighting the significance of these developments.

As examined above, the Chinese government has strict understandings of ethnicity, culture and language. For this paper, I will take the example of a specific government project, the Confucius Institute, which was created for the diffusion of the Chinese language abroad. This case particularly shows how these understandings are reflected in

government undertakings. In this chapter, I will examine the external language policy of the Chinese government from the viewpoint of internal language policy.

After the Second World War the Chinese government implemented a language policy that sought to simplify written Chinese and create a standard language. However, due to the huge area of the country, the implementation of a standard language could not function throughout the whole of the country (Iida 2008: 14-17). To counter this situation, the government exploited the broadcasting systems with a certain degree of success (Calvet 2000: 77-81). But within China there was criticism such as "even though everyone says he or she speaks standard Chinese (*Putonghua*), in fact, he or she merely speaks a dialect which sounds like standard Chinese (*Putonghua*)" (Zhang 2009: 105). Actually, the language policy in China is still a work in progress and there are still certain difficulties to overcome to complete this work (Iida 2008: 26-33). Particularly, people who cannot speak or write standard Chinese need continuous language education (Zhang 2009: 104) and this means that Chinese language education has no limit of learners who hold Chinese nationality. This special situation originates from the wide gap between the standard language and dialects. Here, language education is considered internal language education from the concept of territory, whereas in actual fact there is no difference between internal and external language education from the point of educational content.

As mentioned in section 3.2 above, the internal language policy of China is connected to the external language policy. Furthermore, these two types of language policy are both leading government policies. With regards the internal language policy, this has already been clarified in the discussion of Okamoto above. As for the internal language policy, the external language policy bears the characteristic features of any leading government policy. For example, the external language policy in the 1980s was carried out mainly by the 'Beijing Language Institute' which was a center for teaching the Chinese language to foreign students (Cheng 2005: 89). In the sense that it limited its object to foreign students in China, such policy was a relatively passive one. Though, after the establishment of the Office of Chinese Language Council International (*Hanban*) in 1988, this changed dramatically to become an active one. The main objectives also changed from merely the education of foreign students to the development of a commercial education market.

For the establishment of *Hanban*, there were other movements in the external language policy. For instance, the authorized Chinese language test HSK (*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi*) was already developed by 1984, before the establishment of *Hanban*, by the 'Beijing Language Institute'. So though it would seem a dramatic conversion to active and aggressive tactics, the main direction of the Chinese external language policy had already been set out. Cheng (2005: 171) described this conversion as "turning from empirical teaching to scientific teaching", when he categorized this history of Chinese external language policy. The epoch-making event in Cheng's category is, needless to say, the establishment of *Hanban*.

After the establishment of *Hanban*, the speed of implementation of projects accelerated. In 1993, the 'International Training Center of Chinese language (=国际汉语培训中心)' was established. And in 2000, the name of 'International Training Center of Chinese language' was changed to 'College of Chinese language and culture (=汉语文化学院)' (Cheng 2005: 263). Moreover, in 1996 the 'Beijing Language Institute' was promoted to the status of 'Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU)[9]'. The Confucius Institute is part of the large-scale project of Chinese external language policy. As I mentioned above, this large-scale external language policy project works in coordination with the Chinese internal language policy. Other evidence clearly explains this deep relation. More than half of all the applicants for the Chinese language test HSK (*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi*) are from minority communities in China[10]. This shows that HSK functions not only as an educational method for foreigners but also takes on the role of standard language test.

5. Concluding comments: establishing a new political approach to external language policy

In this paper, I have examined the understanding of the Chinese government through the relation of historical events. Shortly to say, the concept of language of the Chinese government is close to one of means of social unification. Particularly the language policies concerning the internal area of the country and territories external to the country are deeply connected. This relation shows that there is great possibility to transfer the nationalism fostered in the internal language policy directly to the external language policy. This unique relation, constructed with intent by the Chinese government, becomes apparent from the fact that the main objective of the external language policy is unilateral education and not mutual exchange. For example, the

Confucius Institute, as an external language policy, declares its goals as a campaign for advocating language diversity and promoting Chinese soft power Aside from the understanding of the concept of soft power[11], when it comes to language diversity, its language policy was proved to contradict itself. Even though the Chinese government ostensibly emphasizes language diversity as the goal of the Confucius Institute, its behavior towards the languages of minority communities within China demonstrates that it is not concerned at all with the extinction of languages.

To conclude, this series of attitudes by the Chinese government demonstrates which understanding it holds of language, and furthermore of the concepts of culture and ethnicity. The Chinese government puts much stress on its own interests regarding its political and economical power. Such power could easily be gained under a unified society, and this situation forces a particular understanding of language and culture which regards them as methods of unification. Taken to the extreme, the selection undertaken by the Chinese government in its external language policy, is not the smooth diffusion of replacing Chinese characters by the Roman alphabet (Calvet 2000: 79-81, 2010: 236-245), but the emphasis of China's identity in maintaining symbolic Chinese characters.

I believe this research could provide a theoretical scale with which to measure not only the language policy of China, but also the language policies of any other given country.

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[1] There is some controversy regarding the concept of culture. For example, even if the concept is understood as a constructed one, the problem still exists of whether that constructed concept of culture follows the way of history or not. In this paper, I have treated these complicated concepts simply as two opposites, such as essential and constructed. For further information, see 'WILLAMS Raymond (1981) *Culture*, London: Fontana Press'

[2] This title was used in JAMESON (1998) and BONNELL et al. (1999) with the same meaning.

[3] Concerning government steps connected to economic development, LIU (2007: 39-47) argues that such steps could be the last strategy for social unification without conflict from ethnic groups. For further information, see 'LIU Zhi 劉稚 (2007).

[4] ABLIMIT (1995: 218) states that over 90% of Uyghur pupils in elementary and middle schools learn their ethnical language, even during the 1990s.

[5] The Uyghur population is estimated at about 8 million, according to CHINAXINJIANG.CN from November 25, 2009.

[6] For further information, see the webpage of HSK Center below.

[7] Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region declared its independence as 'East Turkestan Republic' twice. For further Information, see WANG Ke 王柯 (1995).

[8] While Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has a connection to 'East Turkestan', the trial operations of the Confucius Institute progressed in Uzbekistan which is regarded as a member country of 'West Turkestan'. The group of 'West Turkestan' is comprised of five countries: Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

[9] For further information, see the webpage of BLCU below.

[10] For further information, see the webpage of People's Daily Online from January 17, 2006: "The applicants for HSK pass over 1 million"

[11] About the definition of soft power, LEE (2010) analyzed that the concept of soft power has two ambiguous meanings and suggested the concept of soft power should be understood as a combination of 'soft' and 'power'.

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