Learning English in Britain: A Journey of Building up the Ideology of ‘Chinese National Identity’
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Introduction
Given the growing population of Chinese students in language schools in Britain, understanding the learning and living experiences of these students in the new academic community and British society has become crucial. When these learners who have already formed a robust sense of ‘identity’ or ‘self-image’ in Chinese culture before coming to Britain move across geographic, linguistic, social, cultural, and ideological boundaries, they will naturally go through intercultural secondary socialisation (Pavlenko, 2001), and their established identities and ideologies will be negotiated and reconstructed through their interactions with the surrounding people. This paper explores the dialectical relationship between ideology and practice by focusing on a Chinese student’s discovery of his national identity during an English language learning sojourn in Britain. Jin’s oral narrative and the data of cross-context observation provide insights into the development of his Chinese national identity in a mixed-culture environment. His mixed family background makes his story quite different from other young Chinese students who undertake to learn English in Britain.

National identity as an ideology
People usually approach their communicative encounters with their multiple identities, and a particular identity or a set of identities will become relevant depending on the activity itself, their goals, and the identities of the other participants (Hall, 2002). When the Chinese students travel to Britain, their national identity will become significant in communicative activities with others from different geographical regions. Sarup (1996, p. 131) suggests ‘national identity is a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time’. National identity, as an ideology, encompasses the ideas of belonging wherever you are, and of being recognised by the surrounding people. Besides imagination, national identity is also an expression of way of life, because ideology is present in ‘not only what we think, but what we think about, what we feel, how we behave, and the pattern of all our social relationships’ (Burr, 2003, p. 85). There is a dialectical relationship between ideology and social practice. On one hand, national identity influences people’s behaviour and their interactions with others; on the other hand, their communicative experiences in the real world constantly assert, question and redefine their national identity among other perspectives of identity.

The Study
This article is based on part of a one-year, longitudinal, ethnographic study investigating the relationship between Chinese learners’ identities and their English language learning experiences in Britain. Six Mainland Chinese students in language school participated in the part of nine-month case study, and Jin was one of the participants. From September 2005 to June 2006, I traced the six Chinese students from their registration in long-term programmes in three language schools in Canterbury until their completion of their programmes. Data sources in this part included the following: cross-context observations; talks, phone and email conversations with students and language school teachers; student diaries; talks with language school administrators; final narrative interviews with participants; the collection of work samples and school documents; and my research diaries. The purpose of this paper is to sketch Jin’s experience of English language learning in Britain, focusing on key themes related to national identity construction. The paper treats Jin’s intensive interactions with different ethnic groups as a source of thick description.

Jin
Jin, aged 18, an only child, came from a mixed family in Anshan, as his father was a South Korean, and his mother was a Taiwanese. He could speak Mandarin, Korean, English and a little Japanese. He had travelled to Japan and the United States before he came to the UK. Jin arrived in England in June 2005. He took the ‘One to One’ English course immediately in Lydd in Kent, where he remained until September. Then he registered in the 36-week International Business Foundation Programme at Crawley International in Canterbury, and lived in a host family. Jin’s mixed intercultural family background and his previous studying abroad experiences made him open to accepting different culture issues.

Confusion over the national identity on the first arrival
When I went to Crawley to do classroom observations on the first day, Jin was absent. He was introduced to me by the teacher as a Chinese student, however, Lan (Jin’s Chinese classmate) pointed out, ‘Jin’s mother is a Taiwanese, while his father is a South Korean’, to clarify his difference from other ‘genuine’ Chinese, whose parents are both Chinese. Confused by this information, I put the question to Jin when I first met him on 19 October 2005,

F: What’s your nationality?
Jin: I don’t know.
F: Which country’s passport do you hold?
Jin: I can have either Chinese one or South Korean one.
F: Where were you born?
Jin: I was born in China.

Jin was born and grew up in China, and had been to South Korea to visit his father’s relatives twice, while
he had never been to Taiwan. When Jin came to study in Crawley, he had the chance to get to know many Taiwanese students and South Korean students for the first time in his life. He made friends with the students from Taiwan, and he always had lunch with his Taiwanese friends. Even when he spoke Mandarin, he shifted his northeast accent, which is not highly respected, to a Taiwan accent. Jin also spoke Korean with South Korean students, and he travelled to Edinburgh with a group of South Korean students in November 2005. The following dialogue shows Jin’s special friendship with the South Korean students.

(Carl is a male English teacher; Shin is a newly arrived female South Korean student; Fan, female Chinese student; Ivan, male Russian student; Ahmed, male Iraqi student.)

Carl: Can you give us an introduction to yourself, Shin?

Shin: I come from South Korea.

Carl: Can you give self-introduction to Shin? (looking towards Fan)

Fan: Fan, from China.

Ivan: Ivan, Russian.

Ahmed: Ahmed, from Iraq.

Jin: I’m Jin, nice to meet you. (Jin said this in Korean, but Shin looked confused)

Carl: What are you speaking?

Fan: Korean.

Carl: Where do you come from, Jin?

Jin: China.

Carl: Shin, how about his Korean?

Shin: So so. (all the other students were laughing)

Jin showed amity to Shin by greeting her in Korean, however, his friendship was not taken in a way as he expected. His Korean was criticised as not being good enough, and he was seen as a Chinese, who could speak Korean, not as a Korean. The other students felt that he was showing off.

**Teachers’ perceptions of Jin’s national identity**

Despite Jin’s intention of getting close with Taiwanese students and South Korean students, he was perceived by the teachers in Crawley as Chinese, and he took the role of a Chinese in the classroom context, because as Sarup (1996) reminds us we see ourselves as we think others see us.

(Carl is a male English teacher; Kim is a female South Korean student.)

Carl: It’s interesting that he (the lecturer in the tape recorder) mentioned China as a developing country. Because from the economy perspective, it doesn’t look like this, China is rich.

Jin: China is a big country, and some places are very poor.

Fan: Yeah, yeah.

Carl: How about South Korea?

Kim: Developed and developing country.

Carl: How do we distinguish developed country and developing country?

Zhu: GDP per person.

Jin: Yeah, GDP.

In this classroom interaction, Jin took ownership of the role of Chinese student by offering the information about China, the country that he felt most familiar with. His opinion was supported by Fan, a female Chinese student. Jin also supported the answer given by Zhu, a male Chinese student. The cohort of Chinese students, who supported each other, and made an agreement on the answer, appeared in this classroom interaction, and Jin was a member of the cohort. Here, Jin is clearly representing the teacher’s expectation.

**Finding the difference from South Korean students**

Identity is marked by similarity with people like us; and also by difference, of those who are not (Woodward, 2000). As time passed, Jin discovered more differences rather than similarities between the South Korean students and himself, and Jin’s intention of getting close with South Korean students ended with failure. After the class on 30 March 2006, I had lunch with Jin in a Chinese restaurant. I asked him,

F: Do you still spend a lot of time with South Korean students after class?

Jin: No. I had a trouble with the leader of South Korean group on last Sunday, firstly, I found the older students refused to talk to me, and then the younger students ran away from me, now even the Korean girls. The Korean students concentrate on each other very much. I once visited the leader’s room, and he had a Korean national flag on his wall. When the flag becomes dirty, they burn it. It’s scary. Chinese people are more flexible than South Koreans.

The differences between the leader of the South Korean group and Jin exist not only in the way of handling friendship, but also in the deeply rooted cultural values. After Jin was excluded from the South Korean group, Fan and many Chinese students were sympathetic towards him, and he continued making friends with students from Mainland China and Taiwan. Having a Taiwanese mother is not contradictory to his ethnic identity as a Chinese, since Jin believes Taiwan is a part of China. This position keeps him as a member of the Chinese students group. The overtime observation shows Jin’s shifted attitude towards the South Korean students: from enthusiastic to disappointed.

**Displaying the role of a Chinese**

Having had unpleasant experiences with South Korean students, Jin tended to confirm his role of being a Chinese, and interacted with people from different countries accordingly. For example, he explicated the nature of Chinese characters to his Russian classmate in the break time. This is a good example of inter-
culture communication in English, initiated by the motivation to introduce the culture of the language learners’ native countries to people from different countries. His desire to raise awareness of his Chinese heritage not only influenced Jin’s behaviour in the language school, but also influenced his behaviour in the social contexts. Jin went to swim in Kingsmead Leisure Centre everyday. Jin visited me on a Sunday afternoon in April 2006.

F: Are you going to swim today?
Jin: No, I am very tired. I went to swim yesterday, and an old lady swam more quickly than me. I felt very shy.
F: Why?
Jin: As I am the only Chinese person in the swimming pool, I have to swim more quickly than others.

In our last interview on 27/05/2006, I put the same question to Jin as when I met him on the first time, and Jin was able to give a clear answer on his national identity after staying in Britain for one year.

F: Now, if someone asks you, ‘where do you come from?’ how will you answer it?
Jin: Now, I will say ‘China’. If I am not familiar with the person, I will stop here. If I am familiar with the person, I will continue to introduce my family shortly.

Conclusions
Jin’s English learning journey in Britain involved negotiation and the development of his national identity. Through his interactions with British people, overseas students of other nationalities, typically South Korean students, and other Chinese fellows, Jin finally defined himself as a ‘Chinese’ in response to others’ construction of him. His story vividly illustrates the complex, emotive, on-going process of the reconstruction of the personal national identity in a mixed-culture context. It also demonstrates that the definition of national identity is not fixed, but a constant process of ideological struggle (Sarup, 1996). Moreover, second language learners are people, whose history, participation and self-imagery are tightly interconnected in complex ways over the course of their second language learning.

References
