他民族を研究するということ：
研究者の立場性に関するオートエスノグラフィー
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Studying Ethnic “Others”: Autoethnography
About Researchers’ Positionality
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Abstract

This article is autoethnography of being a Japanese researcher studying Chinese Americans’ experiences of visiting their ancestral land. Autoethnography is a part of ethnographic inquiry, which allows researchers and readers to understand a broader cultural and social context through a narrative of personal experience. In this autoethnography, I connect my personal experience as a researcher to a broader issue of a researcher’s “positionality” which concerns how a researcher’s own ethnicity “matters” when conducting research about an ethnic group. More precisely, I describe my experience of being often asked “why studying Chinese (and not Japanese)?” by others. I also illustrate ways in which I, as a researcher, became conscious about my own ethnicity by studying ethnic “Others.” Through the self-reflection, I attempt to illustrate how a minority researcher is expected to study his or her own ethnic group for the sake of the quality of the research, and the researcher needs to constantly negotiate his or her position as a researcher. Also, I try to illustrate how fluid and subjective an ethnic boundary to define one’s own group can be.

I. Introduction

If a researcher is a member of an ethnic “minority” group, how does the researcher’s ethnicity influence the ways he or she conducts research regarding ethnicity? This article is my personal narrative, or an “autoethnography”, about my experience of being a Japanese researcher conducting research on Chinese Americans’ experiences of visiting their ancestral land. I
conducted the research from 2004 to 2009, and during the five years, I was asked numerous times why I am studying Chinese Americans and not studying Japanese Americans. Studying the process of Chinese Americans’ identity negotiation turned out to be constant negotiation and contestation of my own ethnic identity. Having been born and raised in Japan, a highly homogeneous society, it was my first and challenging experience of becoming conscious about what it means to be a Japanese woman. After five and half years of constant negotiation, both positive and negative, on one hand, I became proud of being Japanese. On the other hand, I am still struggling and feeling vague about my position as an ethnic minority researcher.

II. What is Autoethnography?

Chang (2008, p. 46) describes that autoethnography “combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details.” According to Chang, autoethnography pursues anthropological and social scientific inquiry approach rather than performative storytelling, and thus, stories of autoethnographers need to be reflected upon, analyzed, and interpreted within a broader sociocultural context. Similarly, Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 742) define autoethnography as self-consciously exploration of “the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation.” As both definitions acknowledge, autoethnography is a part of ethnographic inquiry, and thus, needs to connect the personal experience to the broader social and cultural context to transcend autobiography.

Because it is a part of qualitative inquiry, its validity and objectivity are often questioned. Indeed, Chang (2008) identifies several potential pitfalls of autoethnography, including excessive focus on self and lack of connection with a broader perspective, overemphasis on narration rather than analysis, and exclusive reliance on personal memory as a data source. Yet, Chang (2008) also maintains its benefits for researchers who deal with human relations in multicultural settings because this method is friendly for both researchers and readers and also enhances cultural understanding of self and others. Such cultural understanding, then, may lead toward cross-cultural coalition building. Indeed, autoethnography has been used by anthropologists who conduct research on race and gender (Etter-Lewis 1996), family relationship (Wyatt 2005; Olson 2004) and illness (Smith 2005; Ettorre 2005), just to name a few.
III. Being a Japanese, Studying Chinese Americans

(1) Beginning of Research with Chinese Americans

I chose my research topic at the first semester of my Ph.D program mostly based on my personal experience. To pursue my Ph.D, I moved from San Jose, California, where nearly 40% of the city population is Asian, to College Station, Texas, a white-dominated community. In a first couple of weeks, I felt a strong sense of insecurity, loneliness, and isolation. I was depressed and seriously longing for Japan or San Jose. It took me a while to realize that the sense of insecurity was partly coming from being constantly surrounded by non-Asian, or ethnic Others. Indeed, I was feeling fairly secure and comfortable as long as I stayed in my department where more than half of the students were from Korea, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. I “looked” the same as others at least in the department, which strongly mattered to me.

It was my first time in my life to become highly conscious about my ethnicity. I was born and raised in a rural city in Japan. There, it was extremely rare to see someone who did not look Japanese. It was only a couple of times a year I saw foreign tourists or business men on the street. I still remember that, when I was five or six years old, I saw a man with blond hair and blue eyes on the street, and my friends and I approached him and asked him to write an autograph. I believed that all blond men and women were “movie stars.” When I attended college in Tokyo, the capital city in Japan, I became acquaintance with some people from China, Canada, and the U.S. But it was still not an everyday occasion to directly interact with non-Japanese individuals. In other words, I was completely immersed in an ethnically homogeneous society. As some scholars (Garrido 2011; Rex 2010) stated, ethnicity matters only in a society where ethnic difference exists, I was not even aware of the concept of ethnicity. When I came to the United States and began to attend a school in San Jose, California, ethnicity did still not matter to me. San Jose locates only 50 miles away from San Francisco where the largest Chinese community in the U.S resides. In addition, San Jose itself has the largest Vietnamese community in the United States. I was quickly immersed into the large Asian population in San Jose. In fact, all students in my ESL class were all from Korea, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam. There were a good number of Japanese students, too. After I entered in the graduate school in San Jose State University, my advisor was from Taiwan. So, for four years in San Jose, I did not have any negative ethnic encounter despite my limited speaking skill of English, a foreign status, and Asian appearance.

Therefore, when I moved to College Station, that was the major transition for me. In a campus bus, in a grocery store, or in my apartment, I was often only one Asian. Even though they
did not say anything negative to me (rather, most of them were very friendly), I still felt insecure. Though my speaking skill of English was better compared to the first time I moved to California, it did not help ease the transition. Then, I started to think about what it is like to be an American of a color in a white-dominated community. I thought that I am an ethnic “majority” at least when I go back to Japan; in other words, I am not a permanent minority. But if one is an American with non-white background, does the one feel insecure and isolated for the entire life? How is it like? Or, do members of a minority group have a coping strategy? If so, what is it?

At that time, I found an article about Chinese Americans’ travel experience to visit China. In the study, a group of Chinese Americans living in San Francisco who visited China to seek their roots ended up strengthening a sense of belonging to the United States rather than to China. I thought that the Chinese Americans in San Francisco might be different from other Chinese Americans living in an area with a small Chinese population. In San Francisco, over 20% of the total population is Chinese, and 40% is Asian. Indeed, when I walked on the street or took a bus in the city, I was constantly surrounded by Chinese people and heard them speaking in Chinese language. In the community, I assumed, Chinese Americans in San Francisco may less feel like minority and do not have a strong need to “belong” to their ancestral land. But what about those who live in a white dominated community? They might become more attached to China because it might be their first experience of being surrounded by others who look like them. The idea of conducting comparison study came up to me.

After reading the article, I browsed more about Chinese Americans and tourism as a part of assignment for my independent study project. Then, I realized, while I was doing the assignment, I was feeling hopeful and less lonely, instead of feeling completely isolated from my Asian friends. It had been the first time to feel so hopeful since I moved to College Station. So, I decided to keep working on the topic for, at least, the first semester to feel hopeful. I was not thinking much about academic value or significance of the study. Rather, I used it as a “coping strategy” for me to adjust my new life.

I did not think of studying Japanese Americans because I was not yet aware of the meanings of my own ethnic background. Rather, studying Chinese Americans sounded right to me because I socialized with a group of second generation of Chinese Americans when I was attending San Jose State University. That was my first experience to interact with people who “look” Chinese but were born and raised in the U.S. speak perfect English, and embedded in the American culture. I became fascinated about how it is like to be such a “bi-cultural.”
(2) First Inquiry of "Why Chinese Americans?"

Soon after I wrote a report about Chinese Americans and their roots tourism, I discussed with my advisor about my idea of doing comparison study with Chinese Americans in Houston and San Francisco. At that time, I was not yet aware of the potential issues of studying about other ethnic group than my own, the problems I would need to negotiate constantly in the following five and half years. I had never paid attention to the ethnic background of researchers and ways it matters. The only concern I had was whether my advisor approved the idea or not. My advisor, who has a Ph.D degree in cultural anthropology, did not ask me why I wanted to study Chinese Americans. She perfectly approved my idea, and interestingly enough, did not ask “why” until the end of the third year of my Ph.D program.

The first time I was asked “why” was from my classmates, mostly Chinese students. They asked, “Why are you studying Chinese Americans?” I jokingly responded, “Because Chinese guys are so much more handsome than Japanese.” I never took these questions so serious. I did not think about the issue of “insider” or “outsider” nor did I think about what might be the disadvantage for me to studying Chinese Americans.

(3) Acceptance and Approval

My study went well in the first two years. I did not experience any obstacle; rather it was going extremely smooth. I participated in the activities organized by a Chinese American organization in Houston to develop a network. The members there were very welcoming and some of them were willing to participate in my study, too. Particularly, the president of the organization graduated from Texas A&M University and was aware how small the Asian American community on campus is. Therefore, he became sympathetic when I said that I would like to study about Chinese Americans. He reacted, “Oh, my god, it should be hard for her to find Chinese Americans in A&M. We need to help her.”

Indeed, I was able to conduct several interviews with individuals who belong to the organization, and my abstract was accepted to a national level conference. I also presented the result at the student research week at Texas A&M and won a first prize. Best of all, my application was accepted to participate in a conference in Beijing, China. The conference, called “China-U.S Conference,” is organized jointly by Texas A&M University, the Bush foundation, and Beijing University, and held bi-annually. In 2005, it was planned to be held in Beijing, and the Bush Foundation set a program to take 15 students to China.

By being accepted to the program, I got an opportunity to visit China for the first time and for almost free. The program coordinator, a professor in the Communication department in Texas
A &M University, became supportive to my research and agreed to serve on my committee.

Things were moving forward. I was very confident, probably too much, about my research topic and ability to carry on it. I was never hesitant to talk about my research to other people. I just believed that others were as excited about my research topic as I was. I did not perceive a potential barrier between me, as a researcher, and Chinese Americans. I felt that we were all “Asians,” and I became proud of being an Asian person.

(4) Rejection One: “You Don’t Understand the Culture”

The first clear rejection I experienced was by a Chinese cultural organization in San Francisco, California, who organizes tours for Chinese Americans to visit China. I contacted the tour administrators, who are Chinese American men, through e-mail about a possibility for me to conduct a research with the tour group. It was going well in the beginning. We discussed the framework of my research and modified in some aspects to better fit in the scope of the organization. Although they told me that I was not able to join the tour to conduct a participant observation, they agreed that I can conduct interviews with the tour participant before and after the tour. They also decided to let me present my research and recruit participants at one of their meetings with Chinese American youths. But a week before the planned date for the presentation, a misunderstanding occurred. When I decided to visit San Francisco for my presentation, I thought I might as well utilize the visit efficiently. Instead of just giving presentation for future possible interviews and come back, I wanted to conduct some interviews while I was in San Francisco. To do so, I contacted my friend who attends a college in the area to ask her Chinese American friends who might be interested in participating in my study. Some of her friends kindly posted my message on the web-site targeted for Chinese Americans in the Bay Area. The response from the on-line message pleased me; within three days I received almost 10 responses from individuals who were willing to participate in the interviews.

But the problem occurred when the on-line message was reached to the tour organizers. They were offended because the organization serves only those whose ancestors immigrated from the Guangdong province, a south part of the mainland China. From their perspective, history, experiences, and identity of the immigrants from the Guangdong province were so unique and cannot be compared with other Chinese Americans whose ancestors came from different parts of China. I discussed with my advisor and responded to them:

Thank you for your thoughtful message and insights. I discussed your ideas with my committee, and they confirmed that the scope of my research must address broad theoretical issues in the realms of ethnic identity, cultural communities, and tourism.
Therefore, I am not permitted to limit the scope of my study to a report of a single organization. ANCESTRAL program (Pseudonym) is a truly fascinating and worthy organization, and my hope is to make it a center piece of my research. However, to satisfy the university requirements of a doctoral dissertation in terms of the amount, depth, and range of data, I am not allowed to focus solely on the ANCESTRAL program. This is especially true because I will have only one year for the study and ANCESTRAL program has indicated I am not allowed to accompany the interns to China.

If my putting the message on the list serve was out of your anticipation, I apologize for having not told you about it beforehand. This sampling procedure, which we often call “snowball sampling,” is quite common in anthropology and other social sciences. Especially for qualitative studies, we are advised to make multiple contacts to reach a wide and representative range of individuals. In fact, my committee chair encouraged me to talk with other Chinese Americans who had already traveled to China or had considered doing so. We are concerned that you have perceived this as a breach of the understanding I had made with you. Will you please clarify?

With regard to modifying my research question and study population, my committee confirmed that this is something that happens in nearly all field studies. Rarely are our questions or methodologies bullet-proof when we begin the process. As such, an important part of any good research design is adaptability, especially as conditions in field sites and with local collaborators shift.

Again, I am concerned that you and others at ANCESTRAL program have interpreted these changes as purposeful misleading on my part. Again, will you clarify? I want to emphasize that transparency and trust are priorities in all aspects of my research. Also, I would like to be certain that I understand your concerns while also meeting the demands of my committee for a PhD.

I continue to look forward to collaborating with your organization. Also, I hope to be able to use my study to contribute some new understanding to your accomplishments thus far. Thank you again for your consideration and time.

As a response to the e-mail message, the administrators cancelled my presentation after I arrived in San Francisco. It was totally out of my anticipation that recruiting interviewees could offend them so badly.

After a while, I found a report written by one of the Chinese American administrator and learned that he has a strong anti-Japanese attitude. It generated a very mixed feeling to me. In a
way, I felt released because the issue was caused not because of my research idea but because of my ethnicity. In the other way, however, it is because of my ethnic background that I can never change.

This was my first time to wish so hard that I had been a Chinese or Chinese American. Although the organizers did not directly mention my Japanese background as disadvantage, I thought I could not defend my work because I am not an "insider" but an "outsider" of the Chinese American culture. Though I thought I know the history and culture of Chinese Americans through reading, I may not know the reality. Then, I though if I had been a Chinese American, at least I would have been able to discuss more with the tour administrators about my thoughts.

(5) Going Well Again: “I am an Asian Graduate Student”

Though I was disappointed with the uncomfortable experience with the organization in San Francisco, I made a trip to San Francisco as I planned and conducted seven interviews with individuals with whom I was able to contact through the e-mail message. Fortunately, they were very supportive and willing to share their thoughts with me. In the interaction with them, I felt like my Japanese background worked as an asset to develop a positive relationship with them. Though I did not clearly state my ethnic background in the message on a website, they were able to recognize it from my name. Therefore, when we met, all interviewees already knew that I am a Japanese person, though they were not sure if I was a Japanese American or an exchange student from Japan. After a brief introduction of myself, interviewees often started conversations about what they knew about Japan, such as “Have you seen lost in translation?” and “I like Anime (Japanese cartoon).” Some even said Japanese greeting words, “konichiwa. Ogenkidesuka?” (Hello, how are you?).

Interestingly enough, though I struggle with my non-Chinese background, I, at the same time, strongly appreciated my Japanese background. Many Asian Americans were familiar with Japanese pop-culture, such as cartoon, music, and soap opera. Some are also fond of Japanese electronic appliances, such as Sony computer and Cannon digital camera, and Japanese cars, such Honda and Toyota. Their knowledge about the Japanese pop culture and products often became a great icebreaker in many interviews.

My racial identity as an Asian also played a significant role. When we talked about family and gender role, we found out a lot of similarities. My social identity as a graduate student also greatly helped. For example, one interviewee was interested in perusing her Ph.D. So, after we finished the interview, we still talked over an hour about how to choose a good program and good advisor, how it is like to be a Ph.D student, and how to balance out personal and student
lives. Also, the other interviewee, who has a master’s degree in psychology, told me that when she saw my message on the web, it reminded her of her friends’ and her own struggle to recruit people for their master’s thesis. So, she said, “I thought, on my god, this poor girl is searching for people for her interview. I need to help her.”

(6) Rejection Two: “You do not Speak Chinese”

The second rejection to my conducting research with Chinese Americans was by a grant organization. In the method section of my proposal, I stated that I would conduct my interviews in English because Chinese Americans’ first language was English and not Chinese. In fact, many of Chinese Americans with whom I interviewed said that they did not speak Chinese, or if they did, they used various dialects rather than Mandarin, the official language in China. Although I clearly stated that Chinese Americans’ first language was English, one reviewer commented, “The researcher must be fluent in Chinese to understand the phenomenon.”

Throughout my research process, the reviewers’ comment was typical. When I said that I studied Chinese Americans, people often would ask, “You speak Chinese, then.” It was also typical that, when I said that the first language for Chinese Americans was English, many would say, “Oh, really?”

(7) Rejection Three: “You Should or Should Not Study Your Own Group?”

The third rejection, or rather an unexpected encounter, came from one professor in my school. One day in the third year of my Ph.D program, I was attending an information research session held by a visiting professor. Dr. Jones (pseudonym) was also present at the session with some other faculty members. Each person in the room briefly introduced his or her research topic. At the evening, we were having a reception for the guest lecturer. Dr. Jones approached me and said, “Nah, can I ask you a question?” I said, “Sure.” He asked me, as I expected, why I was studying Chinese Americans. I was ready for the typical question. So, I said, “a Chinese American population is much bigger in the U.S. They also still maintain their language, solidarity and culture pretty well. So, I am interested in why. But, if you are wondering why I am not studying Japanese Americans, that is because Japanese Americans tend to be much more assimilated to the United States since the immigration history is much older than Chinese. And, the interracial marriage rate is very high. So, for me it is hard to define and find Japanese Americans.” Usually, most people agreed with my answer. But, Dr. Jones was not. He did not even let me finish my answer and began taking. “You are Japanese. Why don’t you study Japanese Americans? You must study the culture you are embedded in.” I told him, “I am not Japanese American. I am
Japanese. These are two different cultures.” He continued, “But, you should have knowledge about Japanese Americans more than anybody.” I responded, “I doubt it. And, even if I did, there is a flip side of studying the culture I am embedded in. Researchers tend to take things for granted, and hard to find a pattern of behavior thoughts. It is also very difficult to find a Japanese American community. They are so spread out now and a lot of them are half or quarter Japanese.” The professor still insisted, “You MUST use your knowledge for the society.” I wondered if he was ever listening to me. Then, someone approached to Dr. Jones, and they begun to talk. My conversation with Dr. Jones was over without being settled. It was really my first encounter in which I was clearly told that I “must” study Japanese Americans, or “my group,” and not Chinese Americans.

The critical issue that I would like to address by illustrating the encounter with Dr. Jones is that, Japanese and Japanese Americans are categorized as one group. There are many studies about the boundary between American-born ethnic minorities and native-born immigrants, such as Chinese Americans/ Chinese or Japanese Americans/ Japanese (Ang 2001; Kibria 2002; Leung 2003). According to the literature, ceasing the boundary between foreign and native born groups might cause involuntary inclusion of those who do not feel any connection to their ancestral countries. For example, many of the second, third, and subsequent generations of overseas Chinese, who were born and raised in a foreign country, have only second-hand information about China; many of them have not been to China and have lost their language proficiency and cultural knowledge. How do they feel about being considered as Chinese? Ang (2001) expresses strong loathing about being considered Chinese as “a prison-house of Chineseness” (p. 45) and “convenient reduction to Chineseness” (p. 50), because it overemphasizes the historical origin and racial essence and disrespect to the geographical places of residence. Leung (2003) similarly argues that, even though one feels no personal connection to China, “She cannot escape from being categorized as an identity-carrier of that nation-state, a ‘home’ that ‘Others’ ascribe to her” (p. 252). Kibria (2002) also states that Chinese Americans, in fact, are willing to maintain the boundary between new Chinese immigrants and themselves to avoid being seen as foreigners. Consequently, Chinese Americans express the clear distinction between two groups by identifying new immigrants as FOB (Fresh Off Boat) and themselves as ABC (American Born Chinese). Indeed, when I conducted interviews, interviewees often mentioned about the boundary between recent immigrants from China and themselves.

My experience was different from what the scholars (Ang 2001; Kibria 2002; Leung 2003) describe, because I, a Native-born Japanese, was forcefully categorized with American-born Japanese. Dr. Jones expected me to be inherited with the knowledge about Japanese American
culture. However, I felt enough sympathy on how one can feel about being forcefully categorized in a certain group only based on one’s ethnic background. I felt that, although Japanese Americans and native born Japanese “looked” the same and had the same ancestral origin, we lived in the two different cultures. I wondered: Are we still the same? I realized that most people may expect me to know the culture of Japanese Americans, as they expect Japanese Americans to know Japanese culture automatically. As Ong (1999) states, belonging to an ethnic group may not always be one’s own choice.

Ironically, Dr. Jones has been known in our department for his excellent work in teaching diversity. His lecture emphasizes the importance of an equal participation of females, gays, and ethnic minorities in tourism and outdoor recreation. Traditionally, undergraduate students in our department tend to be so conservative that teaching diversity is considered challenging, and Dr. Jones has acquired a high reputation for dealing with the controversial issues in his class. By knowing the reputation, I anticipated his sensitivity for the ethnic issues. That is to say, it was completely out of my expectation that he “forcefully” labeled me as someone who should know about Japanese American culture. I would not have been so shocked and hurt if someone else, who was known for his conservativeness or white-male-centerness, said the same thing to me. I would have just laughed about it and let it go.

Although I felt strong resistant to what Dr. Jones told me, at the same time I myself was realizing the various barriers in conducting the research with Chinese Americans. For example, the fact that I was neither Chinese nor American put me in disadvantaged position in terms of finding a research grant. Some grants that I found applicable for my topic often required American citizenship, Chinese citizenship, or Chinese language fluency.

Only a month after the encounter with Dr. Jones, I received completely contrasting comments from my committee members. When I mentioned about a possibility of studying Japanese Americans, they said that it would negatively influence the finding because I was culturally too close. I bitterly laughed and asked them in my mind, “Great, which ethnic group can I study, then?”

IV. Conclusion: Researchers’ Positionality

There are articles about disadvantage of studying one’s own group. For example, Etter-Lewis (1996) states:

As an African woman conducting research on other African American women, there is always the risk of being perceived as indulging in self-serving research that ultimately
will be ghettoized because African American women are a group too specific and too disenfranchised to yield widely. (p. 116)

Yung (1999), who studies her own ethnic group, identifies several weakness of her study. According to her, while her fluency in Chinese language allowed her to reach local Chinese women, the interviewees often omitted details assuming that Yang knew it. Bernard (2011) similarly states that when a research studies his or her own culture, objectivity becomes tested because, “it’s harder to recognize cultural patterns that you live everyday and you are likely to take a lot of things for granted that an outsider would pick up right away” (p. 337)

However, I realized that, in reality, there is a strong assumption among scholars that ethnic minority researchers would conduct research on their own groups. In fact, I needed to explain and justify why I study about Chinese Americans so frequently and explicitly throughout my research process. I doubt that, If I had been studying Japanese Americans, as many people would have asked me “why Japanese” as they asked me “Why Chinese.” Or, what if I were a white male? I also doubt that many people would ask me “Why Chinese” because, as Spradley (1990) states, while ethnic minorities are supposed to study their own groups, white males are expected to study ethnic “Others.” Though Spradley argues that it is an anthropological “tradition” and might not be viable anymore especially in the globalized society where we may not observe such clear ethnic boundaries, it seem to me that the tradition is still persistent among scholars.

In addition, I also wonder, in the community of scholars, who decides the criteria to define insiders and outsiders of an ethnic group, or who have the authority to decide who are and who are not members of an ethnic group. That is to say, I, as a native born Japanese, would argue that I am not a member of a Japanese American community. However, as the encounter with Dr. Jones suggests, in eyes of others, we may be reduced into one group. Then, whose perception can be considered more valid than the other perception? On the same token, I wonder whether I am a complete outsider of the Chinese American group. For the most part, I sure am an outsider. I have neither Chinese or American background. But, racially Chinese Americans and Japanese can belong to the same category as “Asians.”

Before I conclude, I would like to illustrate three different positionalities that I have experienced. The first two are the contrasting situations that I experienced in China. When I first visited China, I was with a group of American students. I was one of only two Asian students out of 18 Caucasian students. Throughout the visit, I was treated as a Chinese person by the local people. At a restaurant, hotel, and conference, when someone needed to talk to our group, the person often came to talk to me in Chinese, expecting that I could communicate with him or her on behalf of our group. To respond, I always needed to say, “I don’t speak Chinese” or “English
pleas.” Then, the person who talked to me seemed puzzled. He or she was probably thinking that “You look Chinese, why do you not speak Chinese?” Soon, I began to feel ashamed of not being able to speak Chinese. I felt that I should have learned Chinese because I “look” Chinese.

Two years later I visited China again to attend a conference for tourism, and I experienced the second positionality. Different from the first visit, during the second visit I was not treated as Chinese at all. No body spoke to me in Chinese. For example, when I got into a taxi, the drivers immediately played a recorded greeting message in English prepared for foreign visitors. At the conference, where many Chinese and non-Chinese scholars attended, people talked to me either in English or Japanese. The reason behind the difference can be the fact that I was traveling alone for the second visit. In the first visit, I “looked” more Chinese compared to white students. But in the second visit, I was compared against locals and did not look like Chinese. This is how ambiguous my position can be as a Japanese who study Chinese Americans.

The last “position” that I would like to illustrate is the current position in which I am. I moved back to Japan in 2010 and started new research regarding tourism development in a Brazilian community and Korean Japanese (“Zainich”) community in Japan. In both communities, I am an ethnically “outsider.” However, in the past two years, I have never been asked “why” I am studying particularly these communities. The reasons can be several, including the change of my social identity from a graduate student to an instructor as well as a homogeneous nature of Japanese society (not many ethnic groups to study reside). Another reason that I can assume is that I am a “majority” here in Japan. As Spradley (1990) argues, in the culture of the social research regarding ethnicity, it may not cause much argument when a researcher who belongs to a majority group conducts research on a minority group.

Reference:


