



A Case Study of Changes in Chinese Cultural Identity of Japanese of Chinese Descent from the Perspective of Life Course Theory

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Abstract: This study conducted in-depth interviews with Chinese-Japanese who had tortuous changes in their Chinese cultural identity, and utilized the life course theory to explore the process of social integration of Chinese-Japanese in Japanese society at the beginning of the 21st century and the factors influencing the changes in Chinese cultural identity. Previous studies on the cultural identity of Chinese-Japanese have been more macroscopic and lacked discussions on the factors influencing the changes in Chinese cultural identity. This paper focuses precisely on the individual Chinese and their interaction with the social environment, and finds that the Chinese, who were pressured by the society of their place of residence in the early period, had a rejection of Chinese culture, but they could exert their subjective initiative to actively maintain their identification with Chinese culture. Some major turning points in their lives can make them realize the value of Chinese language and culture, and influence their identification with Chinese culture and their entire life trajectory.

Keywords: Life course theory, Chinese culture, Cultural identity, Japanese of Chinese descent

1 Introduction

The issue of identity has always been the focus of research on Chinese diaspora issues, and as more and more Chinese students choose to return to China to receive higher education, their identity has received more attention. Professor Wang (1986) did an in-depth study of Chinese identity in Southeast Asia at an early stage and summarized it into four categories: ethnic identity, national identity, class identity and cultural identity. In most cases, several identities are intertwined with each other, but Chinese identities are often characterized by multiplicity, and each identity is also relatively independent.

The cultural identity of ethnic Chinese is the most common. The term "ethnic Chinese" in this paper refers to children born abroad to overseas Chinese or Chinese nationals who have acquired the nationality of the host country. They are of Chinese descent but are no longer legally Chinese citizens. "Culture" refers to the set of social behaviors and value systems shared by members of a cultural group. (Yang, 2002) "Cultural identity" refers to "the recognition of a common culture among people or between

individuals and groups." Identical cultural symbols, common cultural concepts, shared thinking patterns and behavioral norms are the basis of cultural identity. (Cui, 2004)

Nowadays, the study of the Chinese diaspora in Japanese society and its cultural identity has been more in-depth. Luo's work (1994) details the history, development and current situation of the Chinese diaspora in Japan. Zhu (2003) focuses on the changing trends of the Chinese diaspora society in Japan as a whole. Ju (2015) discusses the cultural identity of the children of overseas Chinese in Japan from the perspective of Chinese language education and gives suggestions. However, overall, the research on Chinese diaspora cultural identity focuses on the changes of Chinese diaspora cultural identity, and lacks the analysis and discussion of the influencing factors. (Guo, 2018) Studies on the growth experience, social integration process and cultural identity change of Japanese Chinese children are currently in the stage of preliminary exploration, lacking some bottom-up studies that focus on the individual Chinese-Chinese themselves.

In view of this, this paper adopts the new perspective of

life course theory and takes the oral history of a typical Japanese-Chinese student in China as an example in this research field to explore the social history and life transitions embedded in Chinese children from the bottom up, and to elaborate the changing trends and influencing factors of their identification with Chinese culture. This paper hopes to use this typical case as a window of inquiry, and to utilize the perspective of life course theory to draw conclusions and complete the initial exploration. (Wu, 2020)

2 Overview of Sino-Japanese Relations in the Past 50 Years

China and Japan share a common border and have a long history of relations. After entering the modern era, the different development paths of the two countries led to friction, confrontation and war, and the experience of World War II still affects the relationship between the two countries. After the end of World War II, Sino-Japanese relations have gradually moved towards normalization, mainly divided into three phases: the period of "civil diplomacy" from the restoration of Japan's independence in 1952 to the normalization of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations in 1972, which contributed to the Sino-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1972; the "honeymoon period" from the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations to the mid-1990s; and the "honeymoon period" in the mid-1990s. After the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations to the mid-1990s "honeymoon period", Sino-Japanese friendship became the common vision of the two governments, in addition to further economic cooperation and development, political closeness has also increased, and reached a new climax after the visit of China's top leaders to Japan in 1992 and the first visit of the Emperor of Japan to China; mid-1990s to the present period of "political cold and economic hot" period. From the mid-1990s to the present, the period of "political coldness and economic warmth" has been characterized by some political friction but close economic exchanges. One of the important factors of political coldness is the right-leaning of Japan's politics, which leads to frequent denial or glorification of wars, which has aroused the resentment of the Chinese people; and some negative news in China, the "China threat theory" of Japanese media, etc., have also caused the deterioration of the Japanese people's feelings towards China. (Liang, 2020) One of the most influential events is Japan's "island purchase" in 2012, followed by a

poll conducted by China Daily and Nippon Discourse NPO in 2013, which showed that more than 90% of the citizens of the two countries have no good feelings towards each other. country have no favorable feelings towards each other. (Liu, 2014)

With the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations in 1972, China's reform and opening up, and Japan's national policies, the number of Chinese in Japan grew from less than 50,000 in the early 1970s to about 130,000 in 1989, and then topped 600,000 in 2007. As of 2012, there are about six hundred and seventy thousand Chinese in Japan and more than one hundred and twenty thousand Japanese overseas Chinese who have joined Japanese citizenship, while the number of children of Chinese overseas Chinese is estimated to be about one hundred and sixty thousand. (Chen Bin, 2016)

3 Theoretical Framework and Research Data

3.1 Life Course Theory

Life course theory originated from the study of life span in developmental psychology, and through the exploration of Karl Mannheim and Thomas, it became a unique research paradigm after the publication of *The Children of the Great Depression Era* by American sociologist Elder (2002). By longitudinally analyzing the unique experiences of American children born between 1920-1921 and their parents during the Great Depression era, Elder's work aims to examine the impact of dramatic socioeconomic changes on family change, intergenerational relationships, and individual life courses. Elder (1994) defines the "life course" as "a socially defined and age-graded pattern of events and roles that is influenced by historical changes in cultural and social structures." The theory suggests that human development occurs throughout the life cycle and that the impact of life events will continue to be felt over time and throughout life. After the 1960s, it was mainly used to study the influence of structural factors in society and culture on the lives of individuals. This study is based on four main principles of the theory: First, the principle of temporality. Social structures are embedded in the individual's life course, which in turn is influenced and shaped by the historical time and space they experience; second, the principle of timing. The positive or negative impact of important events experienced by individuals on their development depends on the timing of their appearance in their lives, and the timing and sequence of an event is even

more important than the event itself; and the third is the principle of interconnected life. People always live in certain social relationships and interdependence, and are affected by significant events in the lives of others, and social and historical influences are also manifested through this network of shared relationships. Fourth, the principle of personal mobility. Through their own choices and behaviors, people can have the ability to actively promote their own lives and overcome historical and environmental constraints. (Elder et.al, 2003)

3.2 Research Data

In order to comprehensively understand the trend of change and influencing factors of Chinese cultural identity in the life course of the case respondents and to explore them at a deeper level, this paper adopts the life course theory as the basis for an in-depth interview with a Japanese-Chinese incoming international student majoring in Chinese language at the Beijing Language and Culture University, whose life experience is typical, and transcribes and analyzes his interviews. During the preliminary communication, we learned that there were several significant changes in his ideas about Chinese cultural identity, so we invited him to conduct two semi-structured interviews. The two interviews were collected offline in June 2023 and online in November 2023, and the total length of the two interviews was two hours. The first interview mainly collected his personal information, family situation, past experiences, and views on the cultures of China and Japan at different times, while the second interview mainly focused on the details of the key events based on the previous interview.

Consent was obtained from the case respondents for this study and personal specific information was withheld to protect the privacy of the respondents.

4 Different Stages of Chinese Cultural Identity among Ethnic Chinese Students

In this paper, the life histories of the case respondents are categorized according to their age and life situation into "Kindergarten and elementary school years: I want to be a real Japanese", "Junior high school years: I am a mix of Chinese and Japanese", "High school: I am proud of Chinese culture", and "College years: I want to know myself better". There are significant differences in the status of Chinese cultural identity among the case respondents at different

stages.

4.1 Kindergarten and Elementary School Years: I Want to be a Real Japanese Person

The respondent was born in China in 2000 and is a native Chinese speaker. Father was born in China, mother tongue is Chinese, and both parents are Chinese. Her mother was born in China, her mother tongue is Chinese, and she is of mixed Chinese and Japanese descent. Both parents returned to Japan to work after the birth of the respondent. The respondent came to Japan when she was 5 years old (2005) and began to learn Japanese, and in about a year she reported that she was at the level of Japanese children of the same age. Therefore, this paper will continue to refer to them as being of Chinese descent.

Respondents' attitudes towards Chinese culture from kindergarten to the end of elementary school were mainly rejected. He mentioned "I want to be a real Japanese". When he first arrived in Japan, because he did not speak Japanese, the interviewee had communication difficulties with local children, and had difficulty expressing himself or making himself understood by his peers, often resulting in verbal or physical conflicts. The parents wanted to help the respondents to integrate into Japanese society as soon as possible, so they chose to communicate in Japanese at home as much as possible. The respondents' Chinese language proficiency gradually declined and was slowly forgotten. This is in line with Wei Yanjun et al.'s (2012) study of the individual influences on Chinese language retention among Chinese children, i.e., the earlier the time of immigration, the shorter the time of Chinese language learning, the lower the level of Chinese children's mother tongue retention.

Since the interviewee's parents grew up in China, the family retained most of the cultural habits of traditional Chinese families, such as insisting on celebrating Chinese holidays. It was only in kindergarten and elementary school classes that the interviewee began to learn about life in a Japanese family, and realized that there were many differences between his family and Japanese families, such as diet, frequency of bathing and dressing, and daily necessities, which often made him feel shy and embarrassed at school. This emotion made the interviewee "not really like what my parents do for me because they do things for me that are different from other Japanese students." Longlong Zhang and Wei Wang (2022) also pointed out in their study on the

integration of orphaned children into Japanese society that bullying is serious in primary and secondary schools in Japanese society, and that orphaned children from China are often not recognized by Japanese society, and under the pressure of assimilation, they feel that their Chinese language, culture, way of thinking, and living habits are "inferior" in Japan. "The children of orphans from China are often not recognized by the Japanese society. []This phenomenon was also keenly observed by the interviewees. Students of mixed Chinese-Japanese ancestry often experienced bullying and hatred, even for "no reason", while the same did not happen to students of mixed Japanese and other nationalities. The interviewee still remembers that "there were many people in the classroom, and one of them suddenly joked loudly with me and said, 'Chinese.'" Under the influence of such a Japanese environment, Chinese children born in China inevitably develop an aversion and rejection of Chinese culture, even though their parents and families want them to learn and maintain traditional Chinese culture.

4.2 Junior High School Years: I am a Mix of Chinese and Japanese

The respondent's positive and optimistic personality allowed him to not only avoid bullying, but also gain friendship from his Japanese peers. During the respondent's elementary school years (2007 to 2013), there were many negative news reports about China in Japanese society, such as Chinese people cutting in line to buy things in Japan, Chinese people evading taxes to buy Japanese goods on behalf of others, and Chinese people making loud noises in Japan. Under the influence of the right-leaning atmosphere of Japanese society, the Japanese people have a lot of aversion to Chinese people, and many Japanese families and children talk about "hating China".

The respondents' families have long adhered to Chinese cultural practices, but due to the rejection and aversion to Chinese culture on campus, the respondents were afraid to identify themselves and reveal the influence of Chinese culture to their friends. Starting in the sixth grade, after realizing that he had the friendship of his Japanese peers and had friends who were willing to listen to him and understand him, and because Chinese culture had become a part of his life, the interviewee wanted to show his true self to his friends and to show them the differences between Chinese culture and what was reported in Japan. He started by making

jokes, slowly making his friends realize who he was, and then gradually introduced Chinese culture to them. Interviewees also cited "extroversion" as the main reason why they were able to gain their friends' understanding and show the Chinese culture part of their identity. We can see that despite the pressure of social assimilation, the respondents are still able to use their own initiative to fight against social constraints and show their true selves. This is due to their parents' persistence in educating them about Chinese culture over a long period of time.

In this paper, the theme of the junior high school period is called "I am a mix of Chinese and Japanese". Since the respondent's parents were not proficient in Japanese and wanted to improve the respondent's Chinese language proficiency, at the beginning of this period, the respondent's family used a form of language communication in which the parents spoke Chinese and the respondent spoke Japanese. In junior high school, the respondents often invited their friends to their homes, which is a customary form of socialization in Japanese society. In the respondent's home, Japanese classmates were often able to try never-before-seen Chinese dishes and relied on the respondent's interpreter to learn about Chinese food and culture with the respondent's parents. The interviewee believes that the difference between his family and Japanese society no longer makes him feel disappointed, but rather realizes that he is unique. He mentioned that "since junior high school, I felt that I was of mixed blood and I didn't want to be completely Japanese. My specialty is that I'm mixed, and having the perspective of two cultures is a good thing for me. So I don't feel like not being Japanese is a bad thing at all."

The social network's friendliness to the respondent and his understanding of Chinese culture mitigated or eliminated his aversion to Chinese culture and enhanced his identification with Chinese culture. As a child growing up in Japan, Japanese culture became part of his life. At the same time, he did not choose to reject Chinese culture, but to live in harmony with it. He not only accepts his identity as a blood hybrid, but more importantly, his identity as a "cultural hybrid". Li Yuming's (2018) study confirms that children and teenagers who acquire Chinese language by interest are more likely to develop cross-cultural identity. This requires us to actively expand the localization of international Chinese language education, especially in primary and secondary classrooms.

4.3 High School: I am Proud of Chinese Culture

In the third year of junior high school, a new student came to the interviewee's class. He grew up in China and spoke only Chinese, but suddenly transferred to Japan due to a family change. As the only Chinese in his class, the interviewee was asked by the class teacher to help the new student integrate into the Japanese class. Even though the interviewee's Chinese language skills at this point in his life were already difficult to express some of the more complex ideas based on his own account, he tried his best to help the teacher translate Japanese textbooks and texts to the new student, as well as to act as an interpreter for the new student in class activities, sports events, and other scenarios. At this time, he was the only one in the school who could speak Chinese, which made him the "link" between the new students and the school, as well as the "link" between him and the Chinese culture, and he began to be proud of his own characteristics-"Coming from a Chinese family, I am very happy to be here. He began to feel "comfortable and proud" of his characteristics - "coming from a Chinese family, adhering to Chinese culture, and speaking a little bit of Chinese".

As a result, the respondents' attitude towards Chinese culture has changed from "acceptance" to "pride" at the senior secondary level. He suggested that "my greatest ability and advantage is that I have two views, two cultures and two languages, which is a great benefit for me." Thus, meeting this new classmate from China was a very significant point in time for the interviewee and had a huge impact on his life trajectory. Not only did he accept his family's situation and his inevitable exposure to Chinese culture, but because of his background, he felt his own value and realized his need to be respected, and thus felt more favorably about the Chinese cultural background that helped him achieve this sense of fulfillment. The positive feedback from this also motivated him to keep showing his Chinese cultural background and deepen his identification with Chinese culture. The turning point occurred just after the respondent's subjective willingness to accept Chinese culture, and thanks to this, he actively wished to learn more about Chinese culture.

4.4 College Years: I Want to Know Myself Better

During his high school years, the interviewee was faced with a choice of where to go after high school, and during

this period of his life trajectory, he had already developed a fondness for Chinese culture. His lack of Chinese language proficiency and knowledge of China also made him want to continue to learn about China and Chinese culture. He said, "I want to go back and look at my family's culture and the life I grew up with. I want to know the reason for all this. That's why I want to learn Chinese again, I want to learn what my life is like and what my life is like." Wang (2000), in her study of cultural identity and Chinese learning motivation of Chinese students in Southeast Asia, found that there existed significantly stronger non-practical learning purposes than practical learning purposes for Chinese students, while practical and non-practical motives for learning Chinese were naturally blended in Chinese students. Out of his active identification with Chinese culture, he chose to enroll in the Chinese language program at Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU) Tokyo, and came to BLCU for exchange and graduation. Therefore, this is an active and gradual process of identification with Chinese language and culture. Chinese language learning and Chinese cultural identity are mutually reinforcing.

When talking about his life in China, the interviewee said that he felt "comfortable" living in China, and that he could understand a lot of Chinese behaviors and ways of thinking, etc. He felt that his personality was still influenced by Japanese society, such as "not wanting to bother others". Although he feels that his personality is still influenced by more Japanese society after coming to China, such as "not wanting to bother others", he also feels familiar with Chinese culture and would like to stay and work in China after graduation. The improvement of the respondents' Chinese language skills is one of the very important reasons. From the perspective of a cultural group, language has an inward identity, which divides people into the "I" and the "Other". People who speak the same language are "I-ers", their own people, belonging to the same cultural group. (Li, 2023) While attending university in China, he actively constructed his own Chinese social network, and Chinese culture influenced him through teachers, classmates, and friends in all directions, which made him feel accepted by the Chinese culture, and he also became more aware of the specifics of the Chinese culture, and began to understand some parts of his life experiences from childhood that he once did not understand.

5 Conclusion

Using the framework of life course theory, this paper explains how Japanese children of Chinese descent find their place in Japanese society and how they balance the relationship between Japanese culture, Chinese culture, Japanese language and Chinese language in themselves by analyzing the main life events and the stages of change in Chinese cultural identity of the interviewees.

The respondent chose to follow his parents to live in Japan for better economic conditions, and during his kindergarten and elementary school years, he felt shame and disgust for the elements of Chinese culture in himself due to the widespread bullying and hostility towards China in Japanese society, and wished to fully integrate into Japanese society. The interviewee's positive and successful integration into Japanese society and the extensive friendships he made allowed him to begin to try to introduce the Chinese culture in his family to his friends, and he slowly gained the understanding of his classmates and began to accept the coexistence of the two cultures in himself. In his junior year of high school, the interviewee met a Chinese classmate who was new to Japan and became a link between him and the Japanese society. He gained great satisfaction and pride from his Chinese language ability and Chinese cultural identity, which further strengthened his identification with Chinese culture. This led him to become more curious about Chinese language and culture in high school, and he chose to enroll in a Chinese language program at a Chinese university to further deepen his identification with Chinese language and culture.

The main value of this paper is that it adopts the life course theory to analyze the dynamic process of identity change of the interviewees from the bottom to the top, and explores the most important influencing factors, as a case study that provides a preliminary exploration for future related research. This paper provides a reference for future immigration studies, cultural identity studies, and teaching Chinese-American students at home and abroad.

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