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22. PROTECTING TRADITIONAL CULTURES IN CHINA

Significance and Ways of Protecting the Qiang Culture by Schools

INTRODUCTION

In modern China, traditional minority ethnic groups and cultures are threatened by rapid and extensive economic and social changes that follow modernization. The ancient ethnic group of Qiang people were recorded by the oracles of the Shang Dynasty and contributed to the emergence of other ethnic groups in Chinese history, including the now dominant Han people (Fei, 1999). Over their long history, Qiang people have developed a unique culture including oral literature, festivals, music and dance, residential architecture, arts and crafts, garments, diet, and so on. The Qiang population is currently about 310,000 and ranks twenty-seventh in size among the 55 ethnic minorities in China. Unfortunately, with the acceleration of modernization, and especially following the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in which ten percent of the total population lost their lives, the traditional Qiang culture is disappearing. At present, there appears to be inadequate attention devoted to active inheritance of Qiang culture, the focus being rather the collection and collation of Qiang culture as emphasized in Plans for restoration and reconstruction of the Wenchuan area following the 2008 earthquake (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2008). Such efforts aim to rescue Qiang culture as a static inheritance and cannot guarantee an active inheritance. In this chapter I report a project in which a variety of data were collected with the aim of exploration of the current capacities of schools to provide education with ethnic characteristics that promotes ethnic identity, strengthens ethnic pride, and retains the sense and reality of a Qiang homeland. It was found that schools have a variety of opportunities to play a more significant role both in protection and in activating renewal of Qiang culture.

THE ACTIVE INHERITANCE OF CULTURE AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

The history of any culture can be divided into three stages (Feng, 2008): spontaneous culture; self-conscious culture; and, cultural self-awareness. According to Feng (2008), if there is no self-consciousness, the original culture will lose its meaning; only through self-consciousness can historical wealth be transformed into the
contemporary spirit. If a nation cannot be conscious of its own culture and cannot protect, inherit and innovate the traditional culture, it is very difficult to stand in the forest of the world. As Fei (2000, p. 44) observed:

Self-consciousness of culture refers to people living in a certain culture who have a better understanding of its culture. One knows its origin, its formation process, its characteristics, its tendency of developing…It is a difficult task to achieve self-consciousness of culture…First, to recognize one’s own culture and understand a variety of culture around oneself so as to establish one’s own position in the plural cultural world that is being formed. After autonomic adaption, one culture takes advantage of another culture and makes up for the disadvantage of the other culture to establish a basic order that achieves common approval and a set of coexistence instructions that can coexist peacefully with all kinds of cultures.

Obviously, self-consciousness of culture is not inherent. The inheritance of culture can be distinguished as either active, positive inheritance or static, negative inheritance. For example, protecting the social culture and life of China in a certain period, such as the Imperial Palace, the Great Wall, or the Terracotta Army and other cultural relics, is a static inheritance. It is not difficult for these things to be photographed, included in books, put into museum displays, or preserved as digital resources with the aim of preserving the culture so that it will not disappear. Alternatively, active inheritance involves people as mediative practitioners of inheritance; it cultivates people who experience and interpret culture to emanate the vigorous state of spiritual life by inheritance through one generation to the next. Obviously, active inheritance is not only about preservation, but about culture that is vital, dynamic and constantly renewed through practice.

Education, including school education, plays an essential role in reiteration of cultural practices as both author and keeper of identity and culture (Green, 2004); “every nation has its roots … Every nation must know its own values, beliefs and other cultural elements. These elements are essential for every national member to recognize themselves and communicate with each other” (UNESCO, 1995, p. 20). We need the cultural enlightenment that enables children to know their own culture, to understand the culture, and then to love the culture. The cultural influence of family and of community can vary in effectiveness and the influence of effective school education that is purposeful, planned and organized activity can be an important complement – and in my opinion in the case of the Qiang, a necessary complement – to the family in the cultural enlightenment of children.

Before children attended school, cultural practices retransferred mainly through family and family activities and through participation in community. However, society commissions school education to transmit knowledge, skills and ideas considered necessary for modern life and work, and the school has thus become a source of the cultural knowledge of the young generation, as well as the place...