

RESEARCHING KOREAN CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING EXPERIENCE  
BEHIND THE MODEL MINORITY STEREOTYPE IN CHINA: AN  
ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

Dr. GAO FANG

(Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong)

Postal address:

Room420, 4/F, Hui Oi Chow Science Building

Faculty of Education, HKU

Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong

Email: [gaofang@graduate.hku.hk](mailto:gaofang@graduate.hku.hk)

Tel: (00)852-6768-8021

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ABSTRACT

The ethnographic study reported in this article documents an ethnic Korean elementary school student's schooling attitude and practice behind the model minority stereotype in a bilingual Korean school in Northeast China. Using an ethnographic approach, this article focuses on observation and interview methods, which recount how the student attempts to negotiate in peer network home and school demands of schooling and struggles to obtain academic status and maintain ethnic language in daily school life. The article highlights the importance of giving children a voice perceived as a complicated phenomenon revealing the interplay between objective environment and subjective agency. The research results indicate the challenges that China's 55 minorities face in order to achieve economic upward mobility while sustaining ethnic identities and culture at a time of transition and change, and lead us to argue that ethnic child voice is an important avenue for researchers to understand school experience among ethnic minorities within the asymmetrical power relationships between majority and minorities.

GAO Fang is a Post-doctoral fellow in the Centre for Advancement of Chinese Language Education and Research in the Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong. She graduated from Ph.D. program in Education at the University of Hong Kong.

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INTRODUCTION

Research on ethnic minority children attending schools has received an enormous amount of attention for the last few decades as it is expected to inform pedagogic efforts to enhance children's academic and social acquisitions in school (Bankston 2004; Bourdieu 1984; Coleman, et al. 1966; Ogbu 1998; Suárez-Orozco 1991). In recent years, the field has been challenged by its overdependence on the traditional assumption that children become indoctrinated by adults in a more or less straightforward fashion, which often leads to the ignorance of contextualized children's voice of their school experience. A more context-sensitive qualitative research approach has been recommended to generate an understanding of school children's thinking and action in specific contexts. Such a methodological shift is particularly welcomed in light of the current turn in the "re-visioning of children" (Thorne 1987), which rethinks socialization as a process in which children are actively involved (Corsaro 1997).

This article reports on the school experience of one Korean elementary school student in a bilingual Korean school in Northeast China through ethnographic

research, with an attempt to interpret the student's concerns and strategic action to succeed in school. In comparison with research on school children without giving children a voice, the strength of ethnographic research both on children's subjective concerns and objective experiences lies in producing deep insiders' accounts in their natural context. For the last few decades, ethnic Koreans in China have widely been recognized as a "model minority" primarily for educational success (Gao 2008; Lee 1986; Ma 2003; Zhang and Huang 1996; Zhou 2000). The stereotype can be conceptualized as follows:

The model minority label suggests that ethnic Koreans in China conform to the norms of society, do well in school and careers, are hard working and self-sufficient, and maintain a strong sense of ethnic identity and culture. Ethnic Koreans are a model for all minority groups, especially those minorities referred to as "backward".

The conceptualization highlights that ethnic Koreans in China obtain educational and economic advancement while sustaining a strong sense of ethnic identity (Choi 2001). While past research (Choi 2001; Jin 2006; Kim 2003; Kwon 1997; Lew 2006; Min 1995; Piao 2006; Shen 2006) has recognized the potential problems with the model minority stereotype (e.g., the increasing widening achievement gap within the Korean student population and the decreasing economic status among ethnic Koreans during China's reform period in the end of 1970s), there is a serious lack of research on how contemporary Korean students in China

engage with the model minority label in their daily lives. This article enquires the new sociological perspective of school children and research on school children. Following this, it describes how the ethnographic enquiry, from which the case study participant's experiential data were collected, and were carried out and depicts the context of the case study participant's school experience in a bilingual Korean school. Then with a focus on the Korean student's experiential accounts on her schooling experiences behind the model minority stereotype, this article ends with reflections on ethnographic research on school children, especially ethnic minority children in the multicultural context.

#### RESEARCH WITH SCHOOL CHILDREN AS ACTIVE AGENTS – THE NEW SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Children have been so long marginalized in mainstream sociology “because of their subordinate position in societies and in theoretical conceptualizations of childhood and socialization” (Corsaro 1997: 7). The early sociology or developmental psychology tends to see the child as “incomplete – as in the process of movement from immaturity to adult competence” (Corsaro and Molinari 2000: 180). The social construct of childhood as a stage of preparation for adult life has enormous consequences for researchers and researched children. In much of the published work, children have been denied both an essential feature of human identity, and a rational standpoint (Hendrick 2000). Those traditional studies of child and

childhood have focused on the reproductive role of schooling for the acculturation and socialization of the young unquestioningly into the culture and value system and into prescribed social roles (Devine 2003). Researchers do not conduct a direct social contact with the researched children, but rely solely on observation (King 1978). Every other group concerned with education – planners, administrators, teachers, parents, and society at large – can obtain a better hearing for its own point of view than can the child. Through the two main psychological study methods of attitudinal tests and socio-metric analyses, what emerges from these studies is the silence surrounding children. Children as active social agents with reflective capacities are virtually absent (Spyrou 2001).

Since the 1960s and 1970s, critics within and outside the sociological or psychological community have increasingly considered the traditional adult-centric construction of the child and childhood as ethically unacceptable, methodologically unsound, and theoretically unsatisfactory (Woodhead and Faulkner 2000). Many developmental psychologists became viewing the child as active rather than passive involved in “appropriating information from her [child’s] environment to use in organizing and constructing her own interpretations of the world” (Corsaro 1997: 11). The Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget and the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky are the best representatives of the constructivist model. Piaget’s theory focuses on the individual child’s mastery of the world on his/her own terms. For Piaget, human development is primarily individualistic, whereas for

Vygotsky it is primarily collective. Vygotsky maintains that the child always develops strategies collectively in dealing with daily problems. However, their main concern seems to still remain on individual development and the effects of various interpersonal experiences on individual development. As Corsaro (1997) argues:

There is little, if any, consideration of how interpersonal relations reflect cultural systems, or how *children*, through their participation in communicative events, become part of these interpersonal relations and cultural patterns and reproduce them collectively. (p. 17)

The new social perspective raised by the social studies of childhood highlights the importance of children's participation in collective processes in which children, by their very participation, construct their social lives. Children's concepts, statements, and explanations, do not arise from simply thinking about social life, but rather through their collective, practical activities with others. The activities are collectively produced by "children and adults in the many interwoven local cultures making up children's lives" (Corsaro and Molinari 2000: 180). Understanding children's participation in social life is as important as mapping the variables that shape their lives. As Chin (1989) notes:

A person begins his life in a cultural framework that confines him and continues to define him. But being the questioning, pondering, morally and aesthetically sensitive

animal that he is, he does not merely receive what is given. He is an actor, a player. He responds to his circumstances and often redefines the rules that govern his reality. In the course of becoming, he emerges as an individual and as a maker of his culture. (p. 15)

Among approximately 1.9 million ethnic Koreans in China, and 1.2 million in the United States, it is the model minority stereotype that labels Korean Chinese and Korean Americans as a successful minority in the different cultural contexts (Choi 2001; Kibria 2002; Kim 2003; Lee 1996; Lew 2004; 2006; Ma 2003; Marinari 2006; McGowan and Lindgren 2006; Wong et al. 1998; Zhang and Huang 1996; Zhou 2000). In recent years, a growing body of literature (Choi 2004; Gao 2009; Lew 2006; Marinari 2006; McGowan and Lindgren 2006; Wong et al. 1998) breaks down the assumption of homogeneity of ethnic Korean students in different cultural contexts and reveals a considerable diversity in Korean students' academic achievement and schooling experience. However, while Korean students' subjective perspectives and behaviors are paid attention, whether the qualitative or quantitative studies have largely focused on high school students or college students. The voices of young children keep unheard. When how competently and with what complexity the young children are able to "think through meaningfully, critically reflect upon and adapt their own behavior" (Connolly 1998: 3) recur in recent research (Connolly 1998; Pollard 1985; Pollard and Filer 1999), the case study draws attention to the voices of one young elementary school student – her experiences



and concerns that comprise the specific studies among ethnic Koreans behind the model minority stereotype.

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Ethnography has certainly become one of the most frequently adopted approaches to educational research in recent years (Hammersley 1990; Pole and Morrison 2003). The nature of ethnography, generally speaking, is especially well suited to the study of the complexity of Korean children's school experiences in their contexts (Gaskins, Miller and Corsaro 1992).

Firstly, the value of ethnography lies in providing detailed interpretations under the cultural and social contexts. The ethnographic product is a descriptive textual account that places a primacy on the importance of situated meaning and contextualized experience as the basis for explaining and understanding social behavior (Brewer 2000; Geertz 1973; Pole and Morrison 2003). The concern with contextualized meaning ensures that the structure and culture shaping, constraining, and in some cases defining social action are important to the explanation and understanding of child perspective and action. It is linked to one characteristic of ethnography, namely, the fidelity to the phenomena under study, not to any artificial, particular set of methodological principles (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

Secondly, a rigorous or thorough ethnographic research does not ignore, but rather addresses, the complexity of the various aspects of schools and schooling. Social world cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Any event, phenomenon, or person being studied is part of a complex web of meaning. Individuals' actions also consist of continuous construction and reconstruction of responses on the basis of their interpretations of the social world, and the situations they are in (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Ethnographic approach provides an opportunity to discover the nature and significance of socio-cultural variation. In contrast, positivist experiment or survey study built on the stimulus-response model of human behavior may oversimplify the complexity of everyday social life, and reify social phenomena by treating them as more clearly defined and static than they are.

Thirdly, ethnographic approach is able to explore the subjective experiences of Korean children. Everything, no matter how incomprehensible to others must somehow make sense when seen from the inside. It is especially true in relation to children, who may not "express their inner world as adeptly as adults, or in the same terms as grownups do ..." (Yamamoto 1993: 6). It is thus most important to let children indicate their views that guide an individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions by watching them, listening to them, and generally staying receptive to their revelations. While both normative and interpretative approaches play a significant part in this area, the interpretative approaches without any presumption are of

particular value, for they urge adult researchers to question, even reject commonly accepted assumptions about what adults imagine children think of their schools, schooling, and fellow children (Cohen and Manion 1981).

Data were collected from an ethnic Korean student – Tara (fifth-generation ten-year old Korean girl born and raised in Northeast China) at the time of this study (September 2006 – January 2007), who was participating at one fourth-grade class in a bilingual Korean school, the researcher called FLK School in Liaoning Province (one northeastern province). All ethnographies involve participant observation in the sense that it constitutes “a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 249), even though the degree of participation may vary. I took the participant-as-observer role that had the advantage of allowing me to penetrate social situations in order to establish relationships with the informant so that some understandings of her world might be achieved. I observed as well as participated (e.g., taking substitution classes or assistant role when it was needed) in situations. I made no secret of the investigation and made it known that my overriding interest was to observe and research. The role provided me with the freedom to go wherever the action was that was relevant to the informant (Burgess 1984). I strived to balance involvement with detachment and closeness with distance in order not to influence or be influenced by the research context. In addition to observing in the classroom, I also accompanied the informant to recess, playground, and school assemblies whenever possible. My goal during

most of the observation time was to be a silent, unobtrusive observer. During lunch, recess, and break times in the classroom, however, my interactions with the informant were probably much more informal and participatory in nature. Over the period of five-month fieldwork, the Korean student was interviewed twice in order to obtain a series of deep insights into her self-perception, schooling attitude, and strategies to succeed in school. Individual interview took place in the school meeting room. In addition to individual interview, the student was also interviewed with her family members in her house. The length of each interview ranged from one to two hours. Each interview was audio-taped and both tapes were transcribed. Interviews were supplemented by informal, natural conversations with Tara and her friends, other classmates, and academic teachers involved. By giving young children a voice, it was a new experience for the researcher to be on the receiving end of the power differential between children and adults, and to focus on children as social agents who created the production and reproduction of childhood (Corsaro 1997).

## COMPETING SCHOOLING POLITICS AND PRACTICE AT FLK

Since the awakening and upsurge of interest in children's experience of school, the qualitative sociologists of education have drawn attention to a broader socio-cultural context – a context that may constrain and enable children to construct their social world. Schooling for Korean children is currently situated under the unique historical and cultural context of the Korean presence as a “model minority” in

China and the universal context of China's economic reforms and open door policy since the end of 1970s. The state discourses of “hierarchy” and “authenticity” (White 1998) that characterize the oscillating official policies since 1949 have influenced the development of Korean education. The state discourse of authenticity, according to White (1998) legitimizes minority cultural traditions and practices and acknowledges the diversity and difference. In contrast, the discourse premised on notions of hierarchy is associated with the importance of Chinese language for enhancing minority educational and economic opportunities within the discourse of modernity and progress (White 1998). The discourses of “hierarchy” and “authenticity” have impacted articulation between cultural and structure in FLK through the development of competing school-level politics and practice, namely, diversity for ethnic cultural sustainability vs. modernization for upward social mobility.

### *Diversity*

Studying at FLK was culturally expected, to be a time of self-exploration, of engagement and concern with issues of ethnic culture. Ethnic Koreans in China have been described as a model minority with the higher level of educational, demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic accomplishments while sustaining a strong sense of ethnic identity (Choi 2001; Gao 2008; Kim 2003; Lee 1986; Ma 2003; Olivier 1993; Zhang and Huang 1996; Zhou 2000). The heart of Korean achievements is, it is said, their cultural predispositions, which attach a high priority

to the value of education (Choi 2001; Lee 1986). Such accomplishments and the cultural explanations confer confidence to Koreans in ethnic culture and pride in ethnic identity, which have a positive impact upon Korean ethnically-based educational programs (Choi 2008). FLK was particularly committed to cultivating students with Korean tradition and culture. The rise in ethnic consciousness was specifically accompanied by the prominence of Korean language. At FLK, the Korean language was taught as a main subject and functioned as a main medium of instruction. All subjects were delivered in Korean, with the exception of those related to the Chinese and English languages and literature. The policy of giving college entrance examinations in minority languages and the increasing strategic value of Korean language since the increasing business contacts with South Koreans have also been considered as a major boost for Korean language studies.

### *Modernization*

There was the increasing importance of Chinese language studies at FLK. For many teachers at FLK, it was convinced that a command of Chinese stood Korean students in good stead in seeking employment and receiving higher education in the mainstream society. The party's nationality policy encourages minorities to preserve and develop their language, culture, and customs, yet minorities face serious limitations in the implementation of linguistic policies that contribute directly to the development of ethnic identity (Olivier 1993). The state's basic position on the status of minority languages is apparently contradictory (Stites 1999). Learning a

minority language is most often seen as a transitional measure aimed at facilitating mastery of the Chinese language (Stites 1999). Although national policies have swung from pluralism to assimilation since 1949, the post-1949 period is marked initially by efforts for ethnic integration (Choi 2004; Hansen 1999; Postiglione 1999). Learning Chinese is thus justified by arguing that Mandarin is “international” serving the role of presenting a unified Chinese face to the globalized world (Postiglione 1999). The new market economy needs minority graduates with competency in Chinese language skills, which ironically drives ethnic minorities to acculturate into the mainstream language. For most of the teachers at FLK, a conscious and deeper cultural integration into mainstream Han society committed them to the importance of Chinese language studies.

#### NEGOTIATION OF THE HOME AND SCHOOL DEMANDS OF EDUCATION

Tara’s school experience in FLK School was intertwined with her persistent search for higher academic status at FLK and her strategic moves among the maintenance of ethnic identity, and the acquisition of Chinese language skills. Korean’s settlement in China resembles the case of many European immigrants to the United States, in that there seems no major conflict rooted in racial differences between the dominant group and the minority group (Ma 2004). While over a long period most European ethnic groups assimilate, in dramatic contrast, Koreans in China have strongly preserved their traditions and culture. Among many other factors, the

historical connections between the Korean culture and Chinese culture, Korean political and economic value and contribution in Northeast China as well as the embracing attitudes from the mainstream society have led to the high vitality of Koreans' ethnic identity (Lee 1986; Ma 2004; Piao 1990). Prior to China's reform period in the late 1970s, Koreans in China had a certain pride and tried, as much as they could, to preserve their cultural and linguistic legacy (Choi 2001; Lee 1986; Ma 2004). An outcome of the "marketization" policies in China's reform period is the unprecedented changes in Chinese society, the Korean community in particular. Younger generations are attracted by the career opportunities in major cities with a brighter future. They step out of the Korean community and start intensive contact with Han Chinese therefore forcing them to reexamine their identity (Choi 2001). Some Koreans are opting to assimilate to the Chinese majority culture by identifying themselves as Chinese citizens, and some others are attempting to learn and copy the culture of South Korea (Kim 2003). While the "Koreanness" of their identity is never threatened by any overt discrimination at a collective level (Except for the Cultural Revolution), the new market economy emphasizes competency in Chinese language skills for the competitiveness in the job market and upward mobility. In the case of Tara, while she had apparently managed her peer network with top-ranked students quite well, which helped to create a facilitative learning environment for her acquisition of Chinese language and upward mobility, a compromise in her maintenance of ethnic culture and language can be seen in her accounts. The selected biographical accounts in what has been said in interview and



what has been observed illustrate these complex processes and reveal the interplay between the informant's subjective agency and the objective context underlying these processes in her school life.

*Valuing Chinese language for upward mobility: What has been obtained without*

*Tara's voice heard*

Tara's parents went to South Korea as foreign labor when she was three years old. Tara grew up with her grandparents. Tara's parents committed a loosely symbolic ethnicity of Koreans, which was related to specific value commitments with established pragmatic reasoning and rationale for schooling and practice. Tara's parents felt that their child did not require commitment to a visible ethnic lifestyle in addition to distilled ethnicity, mostly notably the basics – the pride and the self-identification. This emphasis on distilled ethnicity reflected their generally high level of acculturation to the mainstream cultural norms and beliefs. The parents' view of schooling was largely developed based on pragmatic consideration. Tara's parents defined success as “self-reliant and financially secure.” In their minds, financial security could come only with a college education. According to Tara's parents from family interview in their house:

As long as you have education, you are fine... I want my kids an easier life than I had...think success would be having a job to earn more money, and obtaining financial safety. (On Jan, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007)

Tara's parents had high educational aspirations of her. It was heard in Tara's home that Tara's parents shipped back many books and dictionaries to their daughter. Tara's parents highlighted the Chinese language studies since it was the Chinese language rather than the Korean language that was helpful for Tara to advance to college adopting Chinese as the medium of instruction. In this family interview, they spoke of how it was important for their child to be accepted in the mainstream economic society, which was what they meant to be successful in school:

We have co-ethnic members. While many Koreans now have lost their Korean membership over generations, we are still proud of our ethnic background and consider ourselves Koreans, rather than pure Chinese. But schooling is a totally different thing. Our children must learn to be involved in the mainstream. Otherwise, they won't have a bright future in China. (On Jan, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007)

While Tara's parents attached a high priority to the value of education, however, Tara's school experience seemed to suggest that she did not motivate herself to work hard. Tara was a B+ achiever (Students at FLK were categorized into six performance tracks: A+, A, B+, B, C+, and C). She was a middle-ranked student in both academic achievement and extracurricular activities. As her class teacher said to me that Tara was a "general student". Tara never studied before school and during lunch periods. She was proud of her friendship group with three Korean girls all of whom were top rankers. The four Korean girls interacted on a frequent and intense

basis and were highly visible both in the classes and in the playground. Tara's involvement in the top-ranked peer network was generally observed by her peers as "lucky enough". As one Korean student told me, "Tara is lucky. She has a chance to get along with those top rankers (On Oct, 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006)." Tara's teachers also mentioned that Tara was easy-going enough to get accepted by everyone. Tara often talked to her friends about her failure of academic work. After exams, Tara would typically announce that she had failed. Although Tara's exam results reconfirmed her academic performance, she continued to doubt herself but refused to do more work. Tara's teachers described her as "bright, but lazy". Her class teacher commented, "Tara's capable of doing better, but she never bothers to work hard. Her attitude is 'I'm passing' (On Oct, 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006)."

Tara spoke Chinese everyday with his friends. The group of Korean girls seldom communicated with each other in Korean. Tara's friends said to me in interview, their Korean language was so fluent that they did not need to exercise it with friends. They spoke of how it was important to speak Chinese in order to be accepted in the dominant society. For the group of girls, being accepted as Chinese had important implications for status and success whether at FLK School or in the society as a whole. This was becoming more evident in their attitude toward Korean language. According to one of Tara's friends:

Surely Koreans should know Korean, because it's our ethnic language. We must know

how to speak own ethnic language. However, we don't have to be very good in Korean. We should learn Chinese better. Literacy in Korean is only useful when you go to *Hankuk* [South Korea]. But you have to be competent in Chinese if you are going to work in China. You know, nowadays many Korean kids take Chinese language classes out of school. (On Oct, 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006)

The group of girls seemingly believed that the mastery of Chinese language was more important for them to advance to higher education. In a comparative study of the language attitudes of Koreans and Tibetans, Zhou (2000) attributed the high achievement of Koreans to their positive language attitude toward Mandarin - standard Chinese. It was the truth for the Korean students in this peer network. The limited usage of the Korean language in the mainstream economy motivated the Korean girls to emphasize the mastery of Chinese language to ensure a secure future. One friend of Tara remarked:

Learning Chinese well is good enough for us, I think. If we are able to know Korean language and able to communicate in Korean in daily life, it is already good enough. The mainstream decides it, isn't it? (On Oct, 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006)

In contrast to Tara's top-ranked friends, Tara's class teacher expressed special concern about the shortage of Tara's commitment to Korean language studies. According to the teacher, "Tara always speaks Chinese, which prevents her from

enhancing her Korean language (On Oct, 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006).” For the teacher, the parental role as supplementing what the school was doing and filling in the gaps was desirable. But Tara’s parents were considered to fail to do so because of their physical absence from family education and their assertion that the emphasis of Korean language might not be helpful for their child to advance to senior secondary schools. It was justified by many teachers and students at FLK that if Korean students took the college entrance examinations in their native tongue, they would have to struggle with the deficiency in Chinese if they passed the examination and entered one of China’s universities (Lee 1986; Olivier 1993). At FLK, while Korean language was the main medium of instruction, Chinese language was used as the medium of instruction for Chinese and English subjects, both of which were main entrance examination subjects. If Korean students would take the national college entrance examination in the Chinese language, they had to learn Chinese well (Lee 1986; Olivier 1993). The emphasis on Chinese language studies was thus considered rational.

*Valuing Korean language for ethnic identity maintenance: What has been obtained  
with Tara’s voice heard*

While it was presumed that Tara did not care about school work and Korean language studies much, my conversations with her both in school and at home contradicted the presumption. According to Tara, her parents would do what it took so that she would exceed in school. Tara strongly believed that Chinese language

and school success were essential for social mobility in the mainstream. She told me in her family interview that she felt obligated to their families for the sacrifices they had made:

I want education because I don't want my parents to do manual work in South Korea any longer. My parents want me to have a better and easier life than they have now because they work really hard to get to earn money in South Korea. I want that kind of education which really leads a good life for me and my family. (On Jan, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007)

Tara looked up to her top-ranked peers and made attempts to get closer to them. Tara told me that her high-achieving friends often worried about whether they would succeed and keep in the top track. While the worries illustrated the high priority of the three Korean students to academic achievement, according to Tara, the worries also led them to consider any peers, particularly in the A and B+ tracks as a potential academic threat. Tara socialized with the three girls, and consciously competed with them for academic improvement. Tara admitted that she disliked making friends with low achievers, and pretended to be non-academic oriented as her strategy to maintain herself in the top-ranked peer network. For Tara, being friends with the top-rankers not only obtained academic help, but also got privileged status in the eyes of the staff and peers. While Tara's grandparents lacked necessary educational qualifications to help her with academic work, this was largely compensated by peer assistance from friendship group.

Unlike her parents with distilled ethnicity, Tara identified herself as a Korean in China, and highlighted the importance of Korean language studies. Ethnicity is meaningful when two or more groups come into contact (Ma 2004). The ethnic label that an individual chooses may largely rely upon which aspect of self-image one wishes to highlight and with whom one is associating within each social context. For Tara, the matter was tied to her emphasis on her identification with Chinese citizens and non-identification with Han. In comparison to the Han students (17 per cent of the total population) at FLK, Tara remarked: “I am a Korean. I am a Chinese, but I am not a Han (On Jan, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007).” Tara asserted that Koreans should be able to speak their ethnic language just like Han students were able to speak Chinese. In Tara’s individual interview in the school meeting room, Tara said this:

I think the Korean language is important. A Korean should be shamed if he/she can’t speak good Korean. We have a Korean teacher here who can’t speak Korean. That is really bad. Yes, the Chinese language is important, but is not as important as the Korean language. (On Dec, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006)

For Tara, within her family, her grandparents transmitted to her about the messages of ethnicity – Korean values and ideas. Tara said to me in the individual interview:

It’s just that my grandparents has enforced in me that I should speak more Korean than

Chinese, and that's the thing I should do right now. I am a Korean. If I speak Korean, others will identify me as a Korean. (On Dec, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006)

Tara's positive attitude toward ethnic language was also encouraged by her teachers. The teachers at FLK were overwhelmingly Korean. While many teachers accepted that students would benefit more from learning Chinese language well in the mainstream society, many of them also emphasized the importance of Korean language as a symbol of ethnic identity. Tara told me in the school meeting room:

My class teacher always tells us that we should learn Korean language well. She says that Korean language will disappear if the next generation can't speak it. Korean language is one of the best languages in the world. We have to learn it. (On Dec, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006)

Tara asserted that she did not want to disappoint her parents. Tara accepted the powerful currents of Chinese language studies which were of great value in the mainstream economy. According to Tara in individual interview:

I would like to learn Chinese better. There are more people in China speaking Chinese. Nowadays, there are many Koreans who can speak Chinese perfectly! If I am going to have a well-paid job in China, I have to be competent in Chinese. (On Dec, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006)



Tara succeeded in establishing her friendship with claims to improve Chinese language skills and academic acquisitions. At the end of my fieldwork at FLK, the class teacher told me that Tara was expected to be a top-ranked student in the term exam. The friendship seemed to help Tara for upward academic mobility, even though her personal status in peer network inhibited her from speaking Korean in the daily school life. The Chinese leaders, after the Cultural Revolution reinstated the original minority policy allowing for a degree of ethnic diversity and minority autonomy (Lee 1986). The Korean minority's administrative autonomy has facilitated the maintenance of Korean language and the ethnically-based educational system in Yanbian and other parts of China's northeastern region. Rather, except for the Chinese and Korean language textbooks, the curriculum in Korean schools was almost exclusively the translated version of standard textbooks (Choi 2004). In other words, students at FLK were learning Chinese history, Chinese geography, Chinese literature, and Chinese politics in Korean. In the process of socializing them and forming their identity, the history and ideology of their ancestral land – Korea – was completely absent. The existence of Tara's Korean identity, to a large extent, was threatened by an absence of activation during her school experience. In such situations, Tara had to make a particular effort to be competent in Korean. The theme of self-discovery has been important one since it became an important means for Tara to lay claims to and to feel herself to be Korean. In Tara's individual interview, she commented:

I am not satisfied with my achievement in Korean language. It is really important to be competent in Korean which will identify myself as a Korean Chinese and be familiar with ethnic language and culture. (On Dec, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006)

For Tara, speaking Korean at home with her grandparents helped her to maintain ties to the Korean membership, and asserted her own voice and agreed with her parents for Chinese value and school for upward mobility. For Tara, such strategy motivated her to acquire important emotional and academic support through her peer network and managed to negotiate the demands of ethnic language maintenance and upward social mobility through schooling.

## CONCLUSION – THE ROLE OF ETHNOGRAPHER IN KEEPING ETHNIC CHILDREN’S VOICES HEARD

Children are themselves the best source of information about matters that concern their perspectives (Kellett and Ding 2004). This article has demonstrated the interplay between child agency and contextual realities in child schooling attitude and action strategies. It is clear that child socialization is a combination of collective process and individual process, which involves not only children as active actors, but also other social agents such as parents in home socialization and teachers in school socialization. To gain a comprehensive picture of the complexities in children’s school world, there is a need to accommodate the influence of the

contextual factors. Nevertheless, to leave children's school world to the analysis of family and institutional characteristics here would suggest a picture of cultural determinism (Woods 1983). Through immersion into the child culture in peer network, Tara as a social agent negotiated parental and school demands and developed her educational aspirations and action strategies in peer network to balance the preservation of ethnic culture and language and the acquisition of academic achievement and Chinese language skills. Tara's biographical accounts could be of importance to understand the value of child agency in the construction of their school world.

While this is important when an adult researcher needs to gain access to children's worlds, this is extremely important in the field research where minority people are measured by a member of Han majority. Within Chinese society's context of "*duoyuan yiti geju*" (Fei 1991), which has been translated by Postiglione (2007) into "plurality within the organic unity of the Chinese nationality", ethnic groups are assigned attributes that adhere to the popular perceptions of their ethnic identities. These assigned attributes, such as model minority in the case of ethnic Koreans in China, shape ethnicity, especially in the early phase of national integration measures through schooling. Rather, ethnic groups with the increasing economic and social capital resources over time, actively respond to the assigned attributes by reconstructing the attributes of their own ethnic identity. In the case of ethnic Koreans, perhaps more than other minorities, their intellectual capital within

educational institutions is used to reassert a more accurate portrayal of the complexities of their ethnicity within the national, and increasingly, global framework. The government's classification project in the 1950s divided all peoples within the borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) into five stages of modes of production (primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist) (Hansen 1999). The Han were higher on this scale than most of the minorities who have been regarded as representatives of earlier forms of society (Gladney 1994; Harrell 1995; Seeberg 2001). Culture is generally viewed as a direct reflection of the mode of production. The minority groups as socio-economically disadvantaged groups have thus been seen as disadvantaged in terms of their cultural values that are perceived to be "backward" (Iredale et al. 2001). Ethnic Koreans are considered highly intelligent and hard working with educational success and socioeconomic advancement in comparison to those minorities such as Tibetans referred to as "backward". However, China's economic reforms and open door policy are creating new challenges to ethnic Koreans as they seek to survive as distinct ethnic groups without completely being assimilated into the mainstream society, while increasing competitiveness in the job market and upward social mobility (Kim 2003; Kwon 1997; Olivier 1993). This growing assertiveness on the part of ethnic minorities with growing access to resources of social and cultural capital moves the nature of ethnicity in China from "pluralism within the Chinese nationality" (Postiglione 1983; 2007) to a "critical pluralism", one that is driven by rising saliency of ethnicity within globalization. In a country like China, education for its ethnic

minorities is never separated from multiculturalism and diversity. To believe in rights for the preservation of ethnic language and culture is to believe in difference (Choi 2004). The presence of a national policy in education recognizing the functional value of ethnic diversity is a necessary condition for the preservation of ethnic culture and identity. It is also significant in studies on ethnic minorities to challenge the asymmetrical power relationships between Han majority and minorities with an alteration of multicultural themes and multiple voices including young children involved.

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