Chapter 4

Ethnicity, Han, Chineseness, and Overseas Chinese

1 The Problem with Hakka Ethnicity

Judging by the frequency with which ethnicity is used in the globalized context nowadays, one would think that it has always been in our vocabulary. In the introduction to *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan state that ethnicity is a recent term (1975, 1). This is true but it is not quite correct to say that it was first used by David Riesman in 1953. William Warner and Paul Lunt first used the term in 1942 when they said, “For the purpose we shall look upon ethnicity as one of the several characteristics which modify the social system and are modified by it…Ethnicity may be evaluated almost entirely upon a biological basis or upon purely social characteristics” (1942, 73). What is surprising is that the term only made its first appearance in the Supplement of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1972. Since then ethnicity has become a much studied topic. In his study of geopolitics and identity, Allen Chun concluded that recent literature has raised salient questions about the relevance of ethnicity in identity studies. Despite its frequent appearances, there is a clear emphasis for the need to problematize its underlying processes. He adds that the “continued misuse of ethnicity points to perhaps an even wider gap in our understanding of these processes themselves and their underlying frameworks of power” (2009, 19). The term ethnicity is definitely a problem for Hakka studies in the twenty-first century.

In the same volume, edited by Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, Orlando Patterson defines ethnicity as “that condition wherein certain members of a society, in a given social context, chose to emphasize as their most meaningful basis of primary, extra-familial identity certain assumed cultural, national, or somatic traits” (1975, 308). Five years later, in 1980 Patterson notes the confusion that the term has created and he sees the need to further clarify what ethnicity means and what it does not mean or cannot mean. He says, “I want to clarify the relationship, if any, between language and ethnicity, from the viewpoint of a sociologist who views language as a component of culture and not of a linguist or sociolinguist whose primary focus is language itself; and I want to consider how it is that bidialectism or bilingualism can be either a creative process or an impediment, the circumstances under which
one or the other is likely, the way in which ethnicity relates to the outcome” (1980, 62).

Patterson’s ethnicity has three aspects and they are:

1. A belief dimension—the element of consciousness or primary focus;
2. A group dimension—the group with which one identifies on the basis of this criterion; and

He also emphasized that “shared culture does not necessarily produce an ethnic group . . . [and] the culture group is not an ethnic group” (ibid., 63). Hakka in the twentieth century is a case in point. If we use Patterson’s definition of ethnicity, Hakka in the twenty-first century only satisfy two of the three criteria i.e. the Hakka believe they have distinctive social characteristics that set them apart from the other Chinese dialect groups and they are a group based on cultural markers. However, Hakka in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries do not have “an ideological component—a commitment to the idea of ethnicity itself.” In this day and age, I do not think the Hakka want to think of themselves as an ‘ethnic group’ because they do not want to be separated from the ‘Chinese family’. The Chinese label is something that overseas Chinese still hold dear. However, it should not be mistaken for the ‘Mainland Chinese brand’, which is not the same as being an overseas Chinese (more discussion below). Being Chinese has currency and cultural capital in the twenty-first century but whether being Hakka is essential or not, is another question.

Marcus Bank listed a collection of definitions and descriptions of the term ‘ethnicity’ (1996, 4–5). Many of these ‘classical’ definitions are difficult to apply to the Hakka case. By ‘classical’ I mean those definitions or descriptions given mostly by anthropologists in their writings from the 1940s to mid-eighties. Another problem is that these definitions are based on studies of non-Chinese societies. Some of these definitions might have been appropriate in describing Chinese ethnicity at some point in history but they are not specific enough. By the 1980s the term ethnicity is not so much a term ‘on the move’ as Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan describe it, but it is also a term ‘under fire’ (1975, 1). Forward to the last decade of the twentieth and first decade of the

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100 For further discussion on biculturality in modern China and in Chinese studies, see also Huang P. (2000).