Multicultural schizophrenia: "You are different, you are chinese"

Chow, Y.F.

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Yiu Fai Chow is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam. His project concerns young Chinese living in the Netherlands and their use of popular culture, in particular martial arts films, beauty pageant and pop music.

“YOU ARE DIFFERENT, YOU ARE CHINESE”

Yiu Fai Chow

“…This new neighbour of mine, I think he’s Moroccan. He’s keeping his wife home all the time. But then he’s allowing his kids to hang around! Don’t they have to work or go to school or something? And their garden is horrible, so asocial. Migrants should really integrate better.”
– “Excuse me, I am also a migrant.”
– “Oh, but you are different, you are Chinese.”

YES, I AM Chinese, and I have been living in the Netherlands for more than a decade and a half. What I just quoted was an excerpt of an exchange between me and a middle-aged, Dutch – I mean, white – woman. Such exchange, in hundreds of slightly different versions, occurs to me much more often, all with essentially the same message: they are complaining about ethnic minorities and the multicultural society, but they are not talking about me. I don’t know if I feel flattered or insulted. I don’t know if I feel included or excluded. I am confused. While these white Dutch acquaintances are confiding to me their complaints about ethnic minorities – from personal suspicions of discrimination against women, poor parenthood and asocial behaviour to more general accusations of abusing social security, criminality and refusal to integrate- I find myself placed in a minor identity crisis. Am I a member of ethnic minorities? On the one hand, I feel like one; but on the other, I know I am quite often not considered, at least in the terms set out during such exchanges,
to be one. This essay begins with an outline of the multicultural schizophrenia that is inherent in the current discussions in the Netherlands on ethnic minorities and integration, in general, and the model minority discourse framing the Chinese, in particular. Against this context, I will zoom in, in the latter half of this essay, onto the experience of five young Dutch-Chinese.

indeed, the terms during the exchange I quoted above are dubious. If I, a Chinese living in the Netherlands, have my share of identity crises, I start to wonder if these people who talk to me are perhaps slightly schizophrenic. The simple utterance, “Oh, but you are different, you are Chinese” is in fact an oblique way of articulating two important aspects of the Chinese situation in the Dutch society:

1. They are generally perceived and homogenised to be different from other minorities that cause problems to the Dutch society; and, therefore,
2. they are not included in the Dutch multicultural discussions that are framed by problems, which are economic, social and increasingly cultural.

The two, cyclically, feed on each other to produce and maintain what I understand as the Chinese ‘model minority myth’. Indeed, in the Netherlands, as in most other European countries, public discourses on the ‘multicultural drama’ – to use Dutch publicist Paul Scheffer’s (2000) controversial term – omit the Chinese, often said to be one of the oldest ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. Amidst the scanty media attention the Dutch-Chinese receive, they are, however, often referred to as ‘model minority’. On the front page of a Saturday supplement, for instance, the best-selling Dutch national daily De Telegraaf featured a headline that called the Chinese “Ideale Allochtoon” (“Ideal migrant”)ii, saying that “Ze klagen niet, ze halen geen narigheid uit en ze werken hard” (“They don’t complain, they don’t cause troubles, they work hard,” Roosendaal 2004). Similar to what Keith Osajima found in his study of popular press images of Asian Americans (2005), empirical evidence of success and a culturally based explanation, the two core elements of the model minority myth, were cited in the press report. Far from offering an innocent compliment to one of the ethnic minorities in the society, the epitaph ‘model’ serves a variety of functions, such as disciplining the Chinese themselves and engendering power struggles among ethnic minorities. More fundamentally, such a success story helps convince everybody, minorities or not, that the system, in this case the Dutch system, is fair and open; it is not racist (Osajima 2005). Look, the Chinese have made it, why can’t the other ethnic groups? And, if they can’t, it must be themselves or their culture to blame, not the system.

iFor a history of Chinese migration to the Netherlands, see for instance Li 1999; Pieke and Benton 1995.
iiFor a genealogy of “autochthony”, a related term to “allochtoon,” see Geschiere (2009).
Multicultural Schizophrenia

HOWEVER, AS MUCH as the model minority may attest to the health of the system, it betrays the schizophrenic nature of the whole multicultural discussions. When the discussions concern the ‘problem minorities’, they are increasingly framed in cultural terms, and the key word is increasingly integration or the acceptance of ‘Dutch’ norms and values (see, for instance, D’Haenens et al. 2005; Duits and van Zoonen 2006; Peeters and D’Haenens 2005; WRR 2007). On the other hand, when the discussions ignore the Dutch-Chinese, no one seems to mind if they are discriminating against women, suppressing homosexuality or not inviting neighbours for coffee. Rather than seeing cultural backgrounds or ‘homeland’ cultures as the roots of integration evils, the construction of the model minority myth gives credit to the so-called Chinese traditions and values as one big reason for the Chinese success story: the work ethics, family values, solving-one’s-own-problem mentality and so forth. In both political and popular discourses, other ethnic minorities are generally desired, and increasingly requested, to integrate into the mainstream Dutch society, culturally. The Chinese are perceived to be exemplary, precisely because they remain Chinese. The implicit comment put forward to other minorities seems to be: how Dutch are you? And, to the Dutch-Chinese: how Chinese! That, to me, is a sign of multicultural schizophrenia. My deployment of the term ‘schizophrenia’, I hasten to add, is deliberately rhetorical. I want to contest the dominant discourse of ‘multicultural drama’ and posit that the discussions in the wake of the ‘multicultural drama’ may be as pathological as the symptoms they aim to identify and cure. I want to draw at least some of the attention from the content of the discussions to the shifting terms they take, and, therefore, the shifting demands they make on ethnic minorities. For that matter, the use of such collective terms as ‘the Chinese’ and ‘other ethnic minorities’ is never intended to erase any diversity within the collectivities or to absolutise the differences between them. Rather, the admittedly shortcut terms are used to foreground the schizophrenic nature of discussions on ethnic minorities and integration.

“OH, BUT YOU are different, you are Chinese”. How are the Dutch-Chinese responding to this schizophrenia wrapped up as compliment? How do they negotiate with the homogenising force of the model minority myth? What do they think of the multicultural society that includes them as a different category of migrants but excludes them from its public discussions?
I was talking to five Dutch-Chinese, who were born and/or growing up in the Netherlands, aged 20-30, four males and one female. Within the scope of this exploratory study, I must emphasise what I learn from them does not or should not in any way claim to be definitive or representative. At least, they are the recuperated voices the mainstream society and media have chosen to silence (van Zoonen 1994). At best, they provide us with glimpses of how some Dutch-Chinese of their generation lead their lives under the shadow of a model minority.

THE SHADOW IS their own, in the sense that they know it is there, very much part of their life and yet not quite. As shadows go, sometimes they want to shake theirs off. Not surprisingly, all of them agree that Dutch-Chinese are exemplary. And, it is not only them, but also ‘the Dutch’, who would agree, they say. More amazingly, they would explicate this model minority in terms perfectly identical to what the headline of De Telegraaf spells out. Terence’s comment is typical:

“I think the Chinese are good models for other minorities in the Netherlands, because I find the Chinese in general more quiet, hardworking, and causing fewer problems, let’s say, than other minorities in the Netherlands. And most Dutch people often have good impressions of the Chinese.”

OCCASIONALLY, THEY WOULD articulate a sense of pride in the Chinese achievement, particularly by the first generation. Having said that, none of these Dutch-Chinese I talked to would admit to modeling their life accordingly. Instead, they seem to be taking some distance from this dominant description, as if they were talking about the Dutch-Chinese generally but not themselves, necessarily. Their relationship with the model minority myth is more complex than being proud. There are at least three strategies, I observe, by which they are negotiating with the ‘success story’ without fundamentally questioning the category itself: it is not entirely good, not entirely true, or not entirely relevant.

WHILE DISCUSSING THE issue of Chinese ‘quietness’, Amy criticises the Dutch-Chinese (including herself, she admits) for “preferring to hang out with fellow Chinese” and “not mingling with other ethnic groups”. Daniel, at first, attributes this quietness to ‘the genes or the culture’. Immediately after he says so, he changes his mind:
“Now I think of it, it’s different in China or Hong Kong, where people do express their thoughts. I think I am also reserved. But, I’m trying to change that because I found out that it is a bad habit. For example, when I am in a group of Dutch people or people with different ethnic backgrounds, I’ll be the one to come up with least suggestions.”

DRAWING ON HIS experiences in China and Hong Kong, where the Chinese there seem to be more ready than the Chinese here (in the Netherlands) to speak up for themselves, Daniel starts questioning the ‘genetic’ or ‘cultural’ explanation for the presumably positive Chinese attribute of ‘quietness’. The possibility of doing Chineseness differently prompts Daniel to become more critical of his own personality trait, which is often considered ‘rooted’ in Chinese culture. While Amy and Daniel find the model minority story not entirely good, Way believes it is not entirely true, either:

“Chinese people are hard workers. But I think the number is decreasing... When I was young I saw everybody busy working and earning money, I thought Chinese were hardworking. But when I got older, I got to know more people. There are a lot of useful and hardworking people. But there are also a lot of lazy people who are just gambling.”

CONTINUING ON THE theme of hardworking Chinese, TK is not so much bothered by its truthfulness; he thinks it is not entirely relevant to how he and his contemporaries would shape their lives:

“The first generation was generally busy with setting up their business and earning money. They worked long hours. And, they didn’t have any time apart from work. But, the second or third generation is not like that.” (TK)

“I know many Chinese wouldn’t mind working while everybody else is taking their coffee break, or taking up overtime work without making any complaint. But I want more freedom... or maybe I am just lazy.” (Terence)

WHATEVER TERENCE’S REASON is, he is relating to the model minority myth, not unlike the other younger Dutch-Chinese I talked to. They subscribe to it, but at the same time, they negotiate with it, refusing, in their own ways, to be homogenised. It is perhaps not coincidental that none of them would use ‘we’ when they are referring to the Chinese in the Netherlands.
AS MUCH AS these Dutch-Chinese are trying to be different from what the model minority myth would describe and prescribe, they also express a strong urge to be the same as their fellow Dutch people. Despite the fact that they are largely excluded in multicultural discussions, they are not exempted from their consequences, particularly the demands of integration. The five Dutch-Chinese I talked to invariably support the dominant ideas of integration. In Terence’s words:

“Ethnic minorities should adjust to the Dutch culture, for instance learning the language and the culture, mingling with Dutch people, follow the Dutch laws, basically living smoothly with Dutch people... learning what the Dutch norms and values are and hold onto them.”

AMY ALSO SUGGESTS that minorities should not speak their own language or laugh too loudly in public spaces to avoid insecure feelings among people who do not understand what they are saying and laughing about, an idea reminiscent of the code of conduct circulated by the Rotterdam city government in January 2006 and endorsed by the Dutch Minister of Integration at the time, Rita Verdonk. According to a report in De Volkskrant, Verdonk was suggesting to turn the code national, urging all citizens to speak only Dutch in public spaces (Kruijt 2006).

ALTHOUGH NONE OF the Dutch-Chinese youngsters I talked to challenge the integration paradigm, all of them hasten to add at least two conditions that are increasingly inaudible in dominant discourses. First, “don’t forget your own roots”, as Amy puts it. Without the stigma surrounding other ‘homeland’ cultures, particularly the so-called Muslim culture, these young Dutch-Chinese simply insist on the importance of keeping in touch with ‘your own culture’, the most common practice of which would be, as Way says, “I rather hang out with Chinese than Dutch people.” Second, they take integration as a mutual relationship. “I also expect the Dutch people to learn about the minorities”, says Daniel, characteristically. Some of them do point out that while the Dutch people have increasingly placed other minorities in a negative light, they are becoming increasingly interested in Chinese culture, particularly in conjunction with ‘the rise of China’. The examples they quote are, however, confined to ‘sinology studies’, ‘Asian trade market’ and the Dutch participation in Chinese New Year celebrations. In any case, the heightened but limited areas of interest the Dutch show in Chinese culture are evidently not enough to overcome the cultural gap between the Dutch society and the Chinese, as perceived by these Dutch-Chinese. In articulating their demand for stronger mutual understanding, they also feel that the persistent
cultural gap may sometimes transform itself into a discrimination mechanism, or a ‘glass ceiling’ if you like, against the Chinese in the Netherlands. TK says:

“Some friends of mine believe that they will never be totally accepted by the Dutch society, that they will, for instance, never be able to occupy a really high position in a Dutch company.”

When a society needs to have an ethnic minority to prove that its system works, it foregrounds the Chinese. When a society wants to frame multicultural discussions in terms of integration failure, it focuses on other ethnic minorities. When it is supposed to be about success, it does not matter that the Chinese hold onto their supposedly cultural values. When it is supposed to be about problems, it matters that ethnic minorities are not subscribing to dominant norms and values. This is the kind of multicultural schizophrenia that ethnic minorities, Chinese or not, experience in their every day lives. What these young Dutch-Chinese told me holds up a possible lens through which to understand the complexity of “integration” and the everyday experiences of living as ‘allochtonen’ in the Dutch multicultural society; it also demonstrates the intricate ways they negotiate with the model minority myth, with the integration paradigm, with the multiple demands political and popular discourses are imposing upon them. In that sense, the Chinese are not that different.

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