

CHINA THROUGH MULTIPLE LENSES: JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THEIR IMAGES OF CHINA THROUGH PHOTO-TAKING AND SHARING

Xiao Rui ZHANG¹

Abstract: *In the current study I will describe and interpret how stereotypical anti-Japanese images of China and Chinese people are deconstructed and then replaced by Japanese university students through their fieldwork in China. I will explore how photo taking and sharing serve as active processes of inquiry that enable the students to think, reflect, confirm, interpret, negotiate, and represent their experiences in China. I will demonstrate how the process of conversing about and through the photos that students took during their fieldwork help them to construct and reconstruct alternative perspectives of China and Chinese people.*

Key words: *visual, narrative, deconstruction.*

1. Introduction

In the past couple of years, with political tensions flaring between the Chinese and Japanese governments, negative feelings have prevailed among people on each side toward one another. Mass media reports as a part of such discourse create and are created as well by the socio-political environment. In Japan, the common image of China is that the country is “anti-Japanese”.

In the current study, I will describe and interpret how the stereotypical anti-Japanese image of China and Chinese people is deconstructed and then replaced with a multi-dimensional picture by

Japanese university students through their fieldwork in China. I explore how photo taking and sharing serve as active processes of inquiry that enable the students to think, reflect, confirm, interpret, negotiate, and represent their experiences in China. I demonstrate how the process of conversing about and through the photos the students took during their fieldwork helped them to construct and reconstruct alternative perspectives of China and Chinese people.

2. Visual narrative as a means of inquiry

In this study, visual narrative is employed as a means for the students to

¹ Meisei University, Tokyo.

see, reflect, examine, and represent the China they encountered during their empirical fieldwork experience in China. By visual narrative, I mean the telling of stories with words and through photographs. In the following I will give a brief description of my research methods.

2.1. Positioning my research methods

Basically two qualitative research methods – visual and narrative - are employed in the current study.

Visual tools such as photographs, videos, and drawings have been used in various disciplines of the social sciences, for instance, anthropology (Mead, 1963; Grimshaw & Ravets, 2004;), psychology (McAllister, 2006), sociology (Barndt, 1997; Banks, 2007), culture studies (Larson, 1999), communication (Pauwels, 1996), and education (Caroline, & Ian, 2007).

Pauwels (2011) provides a framework for visual methods in the social sciences that features three major dimensions: the origin and nature of the data (primary or secondary), the focus of analysis (product, process, or feedback focused), and presentation and uses of the final research product. Based on Pauwels' framework, my current study represents the primary data collected jointly by my research participants, my students, and me. And my analysis focuses both on the product, the photographs, and the process in which my students took and discussed the photos they took during their fieldwork trip in China.

In terms of the precise data collection process, I utilize three major methods in three steps: first, collecting products of my participants, or in Lapenta's (2011) words, respondent-based collections of images; second, focus-group photo-elicitation discussions; and third, individual photo-elicitation interviews. The first step

enables me to get to know my students' views of China through their lenses – what they saw or did not see, and how they saw those things. The second step engages the students in a process of reflecting, confirming and negotiating with their peers their interpretation of their experience in China. And in the last step, I conducted structured-interviews (Spradley, 1979) to ask my participants' about things that I was concerned with in this project.

The study is also itself a narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry takes various forms such as autobiography, life history, narrative interviews, etc. What is in common among these diverse forms of narrative method is “the study of stories or narratives or descriptions of a series of events” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p.4). Narrative inquiry, in essence, reflects the construction and reconstruction of a person's experience in relations to others in the larger social milieu in which they live (Clandinin & Commelly, 2000). The current study is a narrative inquiry in a double sense. It is so in the sense of my students, who provided their visual tools and told their stories about their experience in China, and in another, my telling stories of my students, about their views of China and Chinese people through their lenses.

2.2. Data collection and analysis process

Fieldwork is an elective course in the Department of International Studies in the School of Humanities at Meisei University in Tokyo. Grounded in the project-based learning theory, the overall purpose of the course is to strengthen the students' cross-cultural understanding and improve their intercultural communication competence through empirical experience. Since the establishment of the department in 2005, every year there were fieldwork trips to different countries, including China, India, Malta, Mexico, Romania, and Tanzania. I

have been involved in this course since its beginning.

In the year of 2012 ten students registered with me for the fieldwork trip to China. The period of our visit was between August 29th and September 8th. That year saw a peak of an anti-Japanese movement in mainland China. The mass media reports in Japan made us somewhat glum before we started on our journey. I encouraged my students not to be afraid but to see China with their own eyes.

Almost every Japanese university student has a camera and they all have the habit of taking pictures of what they see and do in their day lives. Photo taking was a routine for them when they were in China. This provided me with a rich natural data source.

After we had finished our fieldwork in China and came back to Japan, focus-group photo elicitation were conducted. The students shared the pictures they took in China and discussed why they had taken those pictures, when and where. This process enabled the students to confirm and negotiate their diverse views of China. I analysed the contents of my students' photos, generated categories and themes relevant to my content analysis, and conducted individual photo-elicitation interviews with my participants. In the following section, I will present the findings of my current study with photographs in a narrative manner.

3. A stereotypical image of China and Chinese people deconstructed

In this section I will present the stereotypical image of China and Chinese people created in Japanese mass media reports. I then illustrate the multidimensional pictures of China and Chinese people constructed by my students through and after their fieldwork trip to China.

3.1. The anti-Japanese image of China and Chinese people

There have been some long-standing conflicts over historical, territorial, and economic issues between China and Japan. Tension in the bilateral relationship was escalated during the summer of 2012 due to Japan's announcement of the nationalization of the *Sankaku Islands* (Diaoyudao in Chinese). In the middle of August, reports in newspapers, on television, and the Internet in Japan reported large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations in big cities in China with photos showing thousands of people crowded on the cities' main streets holding Chinese national flags and posters with all kinds of slogans over their heads reading things like: "Japanese out of China!" "Never give up an inch of our territory!" The stereotypical image of China and the Chinese people created by the mass media could almost be captured in one expression, which is "anti-Japanese". It was in the midst of this negative atmosphere that my students and I went on our trip to China.

It was not only my students who worried about going to China before these events. As a female student, Ai, wrote in her report afterwards:

Konkai FW ni sanku suru ni atatte Chuugoku to Nihon no seiniteki mondai te kazoku ya mawari no hito kara ikanai houga iinodeha to iwarete ita. Jissai watashi mo ikimae made fuanna kimochi mo ari, Seinan no gakusei toha kouryuu shite daijyoubu nanoka, houtou sareteiru younahito ga itara abunai nodeha to kangaeteita.

[Regarding my participation in the fieldwork this time, due to the political problems between China and Japan, my family and the people around me warned me that it's better not to go. As a matter

of fact, before my departure, I was worried, was afraid about whether I could communicate with the students at *Seinan* (University). It would be dangerous if the people there were really like those reported on the news.]

A male student, Tomoki, wrote about his idea of China and curiosity as follows:

Nihon deno houtou ya kikoetekuru hanashi nado no Chuugoku no imeiji ga annmari yokunaku, sennshin koku to futann itteiru noni, tamani hattenn tojyoukoku dato iu hanashi mo kiki, honnto no Chuugokuga dochira nanoka ha jibunn niha hakkiri wakaranakatta
[According to the (mass media) reports or what I've heard from (people) around, the image of China is not a good one. It is said to be a developed country, but sometimes it is also said to be a developing country. I don't really know which one is the real China.]

Like Ai and Tomoki, my students, with all their worries and curiosity, wanted to see with their own eyes what was going on in China, a close neighbour of Japan. Their images of China were those depicted in the mass media reports and photos, and were represented in the vague and abstract words in their statements as the above.

3.2. China and Chinese people through multiple lenses

During their ten-day fieldwork at South West University in Chongqing China, through interacting with the Chinese students, living in and seeing life in the most populated city in China, my students developed multiple views of the country.

South West University is a large university with 50,000 students and 2,650 full time faculty members. Thus, in addition to their close interactions with students in the

Japanese language department, our students also experienced Chinese social daily life during their stay on campus.

In the following, I present with photos taken by my students their views of China and Chinese people after our fieldwork. These views came from students sharing and discussing their experiences in China. I summarize these views in the following major themes.

The developed and fashionable China, a surprising view



Photo 1

Photo 1 was taken by Tomoki Sagawa. Tomoki told me that he was very much impressed with the fashionable and artistic design of this building. In Tomoki's own words, he said:

“Annmari nimo bikkuri shimashita. Konnnani modannna tatemono Chuugokute, ma, Nihonn to hobo kawaranai.”

[I was very surprised. (There are such modern buildings in China, that I felt there is no difference (between China) and Japan.)]

It seems that Tomoki had consistently compared China to his own country, Japan. This comparison here reveals that Tomoki had an assumption that China should have been different or probably

behind Japan in social development, as shown in the words in his writing cited in the previous section, *hatten tojyokoku* [developing country].

The developing elements within, through the zoom lens

However, Tomoki also discovered things that matched his assumptions.



Photo 2

During my photo-elicitation interview with him, Tomoki pointed to the picture and said: “*Annani kireina mono mo areba, konna boroborona mono mo aru.*” [There were things beautiful like that, there were also things broken like this.] I asked him why he called such a good-looking building (at least in my view) a “broken” building. Tomoki explained:

“*Gaiken ha mondai nai desu. Demo, chikaku de yoku miru to, nannka, eakon ga, chitsugaiki ga, ochisou ni natteru shi...*”

[There was no problem with the appearance. But, when (I) went close, (I) saw the air conditioner, the machine put outside, was about to fall...]

In Tomoki’s view, this was the “developing” side of China. He seemed to zoom in and out in his observation of China, and was examining, proving and/or disproving his images of China carefully through his own lens as he went.

China on its way to improvement

Takuya and Hiroshi had their own unique views of China. Takuya in Photo 3 depicted a China on its way of further construction and improvement.



Photo 3

In the centre of the picture is a highway in the shape of a circle. At the background across a river are skyscrapers surrounded by some old-fashioned buildings and farm houses. Under the highway there are a few construction tracks. The photo reveals contemporary China in Takuya’s eyes. Things are on their way to improvement.

A photo taken and chosen by Hiroshi was interesting. Through Photo 4 Hiroshi was trying to express his feelings on economic development in China. Hiroshi took the photo and checked the history of the building destroyed after he came back to Japan.



Photo 4

In his report Hiroshi wrote:

Watashi ha Kareiko wo miru yori mo chikaku no biru no torikowashi wo mite odoraita. Sono biru no wawari niha kannko supotto ga ari, biru ga kowasereta tokoro dake iyouni matatteita kotow o oboeteiru. ...Nihon ni kokoku shita ato kininate shirabenodaga, sono biru ha Jyuukeishi no shoukoutekina tatemono de, kennsetsushite 25 nen dato iu. Chuugoku no kousoku kechikubutsu no shutai kouzoubotsu no naikyuu nennsuu ha 100 nenn teido rashiku, ada tsukaeta nodaga, toshi wo hatten saseru noni jyamani natta tame torikowashita noda toiu. Watashi ha Chuugoku korekara dondon hattenshite ikukoto ni odoraita noto toujini atarashii mono wo tsukuru tame ni mada tsukaeru kennchikubutsu wo torikowasu sono shisou ni fuann wo kannjita.

[Instead of watching the Jialing River, I was shocked by the destroyed building. I remember the building was surrounded by sight-seeing spots, and thus appeared to be eye-catching. After I came back to Japan, I still could not forget that building. So, I checked about it. The building used to be the symbol of Chongqing, and was built 25 years ago. I also found out that the period of durability for the main structure of skyscrapers in China is about 100 years. It can still be used. But since the city is on its way to new development, it's destroyed. I'm very much impressed with the rapid development in China, but worried about its destruction of things that are still useful.]

I have to recognize that, through the destroyed building, Hiroshi in a very short time had a sensitive, and in-depth observation of some problems in China's

recent development, a critical view which took many Chinese people years to realized.

The capable Chinese students and the friendly people

The last theme I will discuss in my analysis of the contents of my students' photos, and through their focus-group photo-elicitation discussion, report writing, and individual photo-elicitation interviews is their impressions of the people they encountered.

Almost every student talked about their positive experience communicating with Chinese people during their fieldwork stay, their interactions with the university students and encounters with other people they met in town.

My students were very much impressed with how well the Chinese students could speak Japanese only after two or three years of study. They were also touched by the "atatakasa" (warmness) of the Chinese students. Misaki, a female student wrote in her report that once in a group activity she mentioned that she had never had Chinese "chimaki" (sweet rice balls), and the next day a Chinese student brought ten of them to give to each of the Japanese students.

Another story about people was told by Aya, another female student. Aya went to a small fashion shop ran by a young Chinese girl. Aya was interested in a skirt and she was told that in China it is common to bargain before you pay when shopping. Since she could not communicate well with the girl in the shop in Chinese, she went there several times but did not buy it. Aya finally got the help of a Chinese student, and bought the skirt. The surprising part of the story is that, on the night right before we left China, the girl in the shop came to our hotel and looked for Aya. She said that she was interested in Japanese youth culture, and liked Aya at

first sight. She felt Aya was like a sister, and brought a gift to Aya. She told Aya that she was very happy to meet Aya and hoped that they would continue contacting each other after Aya returned to Japan. Aya was moved to tears.

Through encounters such as the above, my students constructed a very friendly image of the Chinese people. As shown in Photo 5 and Photo 6 taken by Ai, she made good friends and ate delicious food.



Photo 5



Photo 6

4. Summary

This study reveals that visual images enabled my students to explore and make sense of the world based on their own experiences – they saw with their own eyes and thought with their own minds. The research process also helped me to see the power of visual tools to better understand

my students' experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Visual images provide us with powerful tools for both research and educational purposes. I, thus, argue that visual methods should be employed as both means of pedagogy and research at various levels of intellectual inquiry.

Acknowledgements

I thank my students for exploring China and sharing their fieldwork experiences in China with me. My special thanks to Hiroshi Mori, Tomoki Sagawa, Ai Takeuchi, and Takuya Taketomi for letting me use the photos they took in China. And I thank them for taking the time to discuss their photos, experiences, and thoughts with me.

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