“Practices and Development of Critical Qualitative Research in East Asia”

Organizer: Ping-Chun Hsiung, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto

Discussant: F. Michael Connelly, OISE, University of Toronto

Association for Asian Studies, Annual Conference, Toronto, March 15-18, 2012

Panel Abstract

This panel brings together three papers to discuss methodological and epistemological principles and issues of doing critical qualitative research (QR) in East Asia. The first paper, by an anthropologist, reviews the construction and notion of “shame” in Japan’s Studies. It discusses how the production of knowledge in those peripheries is affected by hegemonic discourses, and to what extent is possible to articulate alternative epistemologies that bypass centers and interconnect traditions in a more horizontal context. Through secondary analysis of ethnographic and interview data in PhD and MA theses in Education (2000-2010), the second paper, by a sociologist, examines the ways in which QR is used by the student-researcher to study curriculum reform in contemporary China. The study discusses where and how principles of critical QR are most evident and missing. The third paper, by a faculty in education, demonstrates how critical perspectives are employed to understand the textured self and transformative identity of immigrant youth in urban China. To ensure intellectual dialogue and stimulating discussion, a non-Asianist, prominent qualitative researcher is invited to serve as the discussant. Thus, the panel offers a platform to explore generic aspects of critical QR across disciplinary, historical and geopolitical contexts. It aspires to articulate strategies for facilitating productive engagement and dialogues across disciplinary and/or geopolitical boundaries.

Presenters

1. Blai Guarn, PhD, Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona (Spain)

e-mail, Blai.Guarne@uab.cat

“Peripheries and commonplaces in the study of Japan as an anthropological Field,”

Abstract

Probably, a focal point in the development of critical qualitative research in East Asia would be the very notion of East Asia, as an epistemological and geopolitical category defined by Western scholarship. In recent years, the crisis of area studies has played a crucial role in the deconstruction of a knowledge production framework where a few intellectual centers and hegemonic epistemologies are pre-eminent, whilst other discourses are marginalized and relegated to peripheral positions. An issue that deserves consideration here is how the production of knowledge in those peripheries is affected by hegemonic discourses, and to what extent is possible to articulate alternative epistemologies that bypass centers and interconnect traditions in a more horizontal context. The paper explores that question by reviewing the historical mergence of Japan as an anthropological field through the work of the American cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1946). Almost simultaneously to Benedict’s definition of Japan as a “shame culture,” British social anthropology defined the circum-Mediterranean region as an anthropological field by means of the “honour and shame syndrome.” Underlying both ethnographic constructions, some critics denounced the most pervasive myths of the Orientalism in the study of “traditional complex societies” that would have a different influence in both local and non-local scholars. Through the consideration of such intellectual context, the paper examines the ideological biases of qualitative research and the challenges of a critical approach that overcome hegemonies in the production of knowledge.

1. Ping-Chun Hsiung, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto

e-mail: pchsiung@utsc.utoronto.ca

“Critical Qualitative Research on China’s Education Reform”

Abstract

Over the past two decades, scholarly interest has led to publications on the origin, practices and development of Qualitative Research (QR) in countries outside of the Anglo-American core. Scholars have yet to systematically examine the practices and politics of critical QR from a comparative perspective. Through secondary analysis of ethnographic and interview data in PhD and MA theses in Education (2000-2010), I examine the ways in which QR is used by the student-researcher to study curriculum reform in contemporary China. The study found that critical QR is most evident where the student-researcher uses fact-based qualitative data to present local, alternative realities that are deliberately concealed in official presentation. Critical QR is most missing in three areas: unchecked adoption of Western theories or models; positivistic methodology led to quantification of qualitative data; official ideology and rhetoric implicated in student-researcher’s interpretative lenses which inadvertently overwrites the informant’s voices. I discuss the implications of the findings to practices and development of critical QR locally and globally.

1. Xi Wang, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University

e-mail: wangxi@bnu.edu.cn, mobile: +86 (0)13466774585

 “Does Vocational Education Light the Journey of Life? Exploring the ‘Textured Selves’ of Migrant Youth in Beijing”

Abstract

With significant urbanization in mainland China, there has been an increasing demand for a skilled workforce in cities. In order to help migrant youth find jobs in industry, many NGOs has been committed in establishing non-profit vocational schools for the underprivileged. This research proposes a narrative analysis on the migrants’ development of identities as competent students, and as qualified technical workers in such vocational schools.

To explore the transformation of identity, students’ essays are analyzed in terms of the dynamically ‘texturing’ process. These essays were school assignments. The first is a part of the entry exam, named ‘My Stories’. The second assignment, ‘A Different “I”’, is given when the course taking terms end. The focal question is how they actively take up and/or resist the subject positions offered them by the institutional context to which they are exposed.

The textual analysis draws primarily on Fairclough’s methodological framework of critical discourse analysis, in terms of its emphasis on a critical intention of unveiling power asymmetries that characterize the institutional contexts and the process of meaning making. Furthermore, in order to arrive at a contextualized interpretation of ‘textured selves’, the research combines textual analysis with an ethnographic approach. The researcher has worked voluntarily as a lead teacher at the interviewees’ vocational school, experiencing their world personally.

A critical reflexive component is also built into the knowledge production process. The researcher reflects on what kinds of researcher-researched relationship have evolved in the field, and how this has influenced the migrants’ narrative accounts.

Discussant

F. Michael Connelly

e-mail: michael.connelly@utoronto.ca