

**‘Do You Ride Horses?’: Discursive Constructions  
of Chinese Minority ‘Mongolian University  
Students’ Subjectivities**

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## **Statement of Originality**

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

**Signed** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ **Date** June 26, 2014 \_\_\_\_\_

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## Abstract

The idea of what it means to be a Chinese minority ‘Mongolian university student’ is usually explored in Chinese academic scholarship and educational practice within essentialist discourses. This approach not only stereotypes students as being ‘backward’, ‘underachieving’, ‘disruptive’, ‘powerless’ and with ‘low’ intelligence, but adopts a perspective that the researcher is the “author of knowledge” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 494) whose detached observation and rational mind provide unmediated access to students’ lives. In this ethnographic study, utilizing poststructuralist perspectives and drawing upon the analytic framework of Foucauldian discourse analysis and category boundary work, I explore the multiple, fluid and heterogeneous ways in which ‘Mongolian university students’ subjectivities are variably enacted, validated, contested or rearticulated in the continuous constitutive practices of category boundary work – maintaining, reinforcing, contracting and challenging category boundaries. It is a perspective that sees ‘Mongolian university students’ as the discursive category and in within/against which subjectivities are constantly enacted and contested in the process of discursive inclusion and exclusion. I focus on how ‘Mongolian university students’ negotiate the category’s boundaries and what subject positions are available.

Through emphasizing the strategic negotiation of multiple and shifting subject positions, I aim to disrupt the notion of ‘prejudice reduction’ (Banks, 2004) in multicultural education which aims to “help students develop positive racial attitude and values” (p. 5). I argue that this understanding of ‘prejudice reduction’ not only essentializes ‘minority students’ as single, fixed and stable attributes, but perpetuates the stereotypical representation of them. I argue for using Petersen’s (2004, 2007) concept of category boundary work to denaturalize and defamiliarize normative constructions of ‘minority students’ subjectivities. Such a denaturalizing act brings into light how discourses are utilized to make certain knowledge legitimized and what discourses are mobilized to constitute conditions of possibilities of certain subjects. Therefore, my study contributes to the poststructuralist problematisation of the conventional wisdom of essentializing discourses prevailed in minority education and social science research and opens up a promising space for future research to explore how meanings are discursively enacted and contested.

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## Preface

On the Chi Le plain,

At the foot of the Yin Shan Mountain,

The sky is like a huge yurtlike roof over the wilderness.

The sky is immense, the wilderness infinitely boundless;

When the wind sweeps across the bending grass, one sees cattle and sheep grazing<sup>1</sup> (Khan, 1995b, p. 127).

The red sun,

Slowly creeping out of the sky mountain,

Wind skims over the green grass,

The grass shakes her head.

Riding on my handsome horse and holding the horsewhip up high,

Driving the sheep and cattle down to the riverside,

I am singing a song, brimming with joy like a blossom flower<sup>2</sup> (my translation).

The above narratives are the household classics that I learnt during my childhood and have been deeply ingrained in my memory. The first one is a historical poem written by a Chinese poet who lived a thousand years ago. The poem vividly describes the Han Chinese conception of Mongolian nomadic people in ancient China (Khan, 1995b). This well-known poem has been incorporated into the national Chinese language textbooks for primary school students and has become a famous catchy poem that many Chinese people can recite (also see Khan, 1995b, p. 128). As Khan (1995b, p. 127) comments, this poem has become the typical example of how Mongolians are imagined by the Han Chinese. The second poem is a contemporary folksong about a nomadic grazer child. It has been widely spread through word of mouth. Though not about Mongolians per se, it

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese original is: Chi Le chuan, Yin shan xia, tian si qiong lu, long gai si ye. Tian cang cang, ye mang mang, feng chui cao di xian niu yang (also see Khan, 1995b, p. 127).

<sup>2</sup> The Chinese original is: Hong taiyang, cong tianshang manmandi paqi, fengchui lucao, caoer ba tou yao. Qishang junma yang qi bian, ganshang niuyang xia hetang, changshang yishou ge ya, Xinhua kaifang.

essentializes an ethnic minority subject to living a ‘primitive’ life. What I find in common in these two folkloric narratives are the infatuation with the vast wilderness, the romanticisation of an ‘exotic’ subject and the representational absence of the familiar Han (Khan, 1995b) in the landscape of multicultural China<sup>3</sup>, celebrating cultural diversity and respecting difference. Whenever I thought of ‘Mongolian students’ and their homeland of Inner Mongolia<sup>4</sup>, this particular representation always found its way into my mind: on the boundless grassland lives the ‘nomadic horse-riding’ Mongolian, whose ancestor Chenggis Khan, established the largest empire in the world centuries ago. As Khan (1995b) puts it, they are “following grass and water” with the movable yurt, courageous, adventurous, ferocious, unconstrained, broad-minded and honest, but also uncivilized, unsanitary and unintelligent (p. 129).

At the initial stage of this project, I took up the above essentialist discourses that offered me a simplistic understanding and prejudiced ethnic stereotyping of ‘Mongolian students’. As I was very curious about the ‘mysterious’ and ‘backward’ life of ‘Mongolian university students’, during the fieldwork I asked them questions like “Do you ride horses?” I held to these naturalised assumptions about Mongolian students unproblematically, genuinely and literally. I was holding onto notions about them as being ‘primitive’ and ‘alien’ horse-riding people living in the remote grassland areas. This is where the question I asked during an interview comes from: “Do you ride horses?” I have selected this question as the title of my thesis as I intended to capture my changing relations with the Chinese ‘Mongolian’ stereotype and my various concerns attached to that in the different phases of this project. However, as I developed poststructuralist perspectives in my data analysis, I was situated differently in relation to this question and I began to use it ironically. Rethinking this question now, I begin to laugh, laugh at both the question and at myself. My supervisors laugh too. My changing

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<sup>3</sup> China is a highly pluralistic nation (Postiglione, 2009). As a united multi-ethnic country, China boasts as many as 56 *minzu* (nationalities) with ‘Han’ as the majority. Other 55 minorities, with a population of 105 million, constitute approximately 8.47% of the total population and are concentrated in 65% of China’s total areas.

<sup>4</sup> According to China’s sixth national census, there are 5.98 million Mongolians in China (Office of Population Census of State Council & Population and Employment Statistics Department of National Statistics Bureau, 2010), who mostly dwell in IMAR, which has a Mongolian population of about 4.23 million (National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China, 2012).

relations with this question and my act of laughing remind me of Foucault's 'shattering laughter' that initiates his writing of *The Order of Things*:

the laughter that shattered...all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of things (Foucault, 1994b, p. xv).

Rereading this question through a poststructuralist lens makes me laugh though with a sense of discomfort. What is it that is so ironic and troubling about the question? What is spoken into existence and what is being included/excluded? How have I developed that ironic and even shameful relationship with the question "Do you ride horses?" How have poststructuralist perspectives unsettled my embodied and essentialized knowledge about Mongolian students? The following thesis is thus an attempt to speak to these questions.