

# Ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity in Danish-language teaching materials for the teaching of Chinese

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Translated from Danish by John Irons.

The aim of this article is to describe, analyse and discuss the representation of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity in four selected learning materials for studying Chinese, three of which have either been translated into or written in Danish. The reason for focusing on Danish-language materials is that they are used most at both lower and upper secondary level schools.

The article will specifically seek to answer three questions:

1. How is ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity represented in the four selected systems for studying Chinese?
2. Do the representations in these four systems differ from each other? and
3. What can the possible reasons be for the chosen representations of ethnicity, language and culture?

There are at least two reasons why it is interesting to analyse representations of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity in selected learning materials for studying Chinese. Firstly, the analyses can draw the attention of teachers of Chinese to representations that are



**MADS JAKOB KIRKEBÆK**

Teacher and education adviser, PhD in Chinese  
Teacher of Danish as a second and foreign language for adults  
Master in Foreign Language Pedagogy  
Slagelse Language Centre  
madskir@hotmail.com

one-sided or inadequate, and help them formulate slanted representations and deficiencies and to compensate for them in their teaching. Secondly, the analyses can help nuance, confirm or invalidate possible prejudices about learning materials in Chinese, e.g. that Danish-produced materials are more nuanced than Chinese ones in their view of ethnicity, language and culture in The People's Republic of China, because they do not have to take the Chinese state's political interests into account.

Of the four selected systems, three are Chinese-produced and one Danish-produced. The description and analysis of the Chinese-produced materials that are referred to and discussed in the following have been carried out by Huaqing Hong and Xianzhong He (Hong & He 2015). There are a number of other studies of representations of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity in the Chinese-produced educational materials for the study of Chinese (including Liu 2005 and Curdt-Christiansen 2008), but I have chosen to focus on Hong and He's study because two of the three systems they analyse have been translated into Danish and are used in Danish schools. The description, analysis and discussion of the Danish-produced system in Chinese I have carried out myself.

## Analysis of ethnicity, language and culture in the selected systems

Karen Risager's article 'On analysing culture in learning materials' (Risager 2014) has provided me with good tools to carry out the analysis of the Danish-produced system and, as far as I can ascertain, Hong and He have used some of the same tools in their analysis of the other systems.

In her article, Karen Risager writes that content analysis, intercultural analysis and power analysis are three common ways of analysing culture in learning materials (Risager 2014: 78-79). The aim of content analysis is to find out how the system represents the target country or countries. What themes are (not) dealt with and what information is provided or omitted? The intercultural analysis seeks to uncover what socio-cultural perspectives and identities the system contains. How much does the majority/minority perspective fill, for example, and are there examples of the system supporting or deconstructing stereotypes? The power analysis attempts to reveal if there are power relations the system is involved in and expresses. For example, are there particular subjects that are avoided out of market and/or political considerations?

Huaqing Hong and Xianzhong He analyse the content in the three Chinese systems which China's national office for the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (*Hanban*)<sup>1</sup> has approved and recommended for teaching foreign students Chinese (Hong & He 2015). The systems are called *Experiencing Chinese*, *Happy Chinese* and *Contemporary Chinese*. The two last-named systems are available in a Danish version (*Kinesisk i højt humør* and *Moderne Kinesisk*). *Experiencing Chinese* consists of textbooks and exercise books for both lower and upper secondary education. The target group for *Happy Chinese* is 11-16 year-old school pupils, and that for *Contemporary Chinese* is both upper secondary and university students. Apart from textbooks and exercise books, all three systems include, among other things, word-cards and audio CDs. The main aim of Hong and He's analysis is to find out what ethnic groups, language and cultures are represented in the three selected systems (Hong & He 2015: 94).

To compare with the Chinese-produced systems, I have carried out an analysis of content, intercultural and power in a Danish-produced system in Chinese, *Kinesisk 1 – Kinesisk sprog for begyndere* (Bech & Nielsen 2006). *Kinesisk 1*, which is designed for adult education, youth education programmes, higher education and self-study, consists of a textbook, an exercise book, audio CDs and a website (Bech & Nielsen 2006: 9). For reasons of space and time, I have only analysed the textbook. Books 2 and 3 of the system (Bech 2007 and Bech 2010) have not been analysed either. My conclusions therefore only apply to *Kinesisk 1*, the textbook. Although the adopted method of analysis does not make it possible to conclude how ethnicity, language and culture are represented in all of the system, the analysis is nevertheless relevant. Firstly, because it can function as a pilot study for a more comprehensive analysis of the system. Secondly, because it can give some idea of the extent to which the Danish-produced system follows or differs from a general trend or tradition within foreign language systems that one can then test out and seek explanations for in other studies.

## The representation of ethnic groups in the Chinese systems

As part of a quantitative thematic analysis of content, Hong and He investigate what ethnic groups are represented in the dialogues in the three selected systems. The result of this investigation shows that there are most references to Han Chinese in the dialogues (48.7 %). Then come references to Westerners (45.5 %) and foreign Chinese

(5.1 %) and finally references to Japanese (0.9 %) and Koreans (0.3 %) (Hong & He 2015: 98, Table 5.2). There are no references to ethnic minorities in China or other nationalities than those just mentioned. Apart from the fictional persons in the dialogues, there are also a number of historical persons in the systems. Once again, there are most references to Han Chinese (47.1%). Then come Westerners (30.8 %), followed by ethnic minorities in China (13.9 %) and finally foreign Chinese (8.2 %). There are no references to 'other nationalities', such as Japanese or people from various African countries.

## What languages and what culture(s) are particularly represented in the Chinese systems?

Hong and He also investigate what languages, what culture(s) and what cultural themes are represented, the conclusion being that the selected systems give the reader an erroneous impression of China as being a fundamentally monocultural country, and that important and actually existing linguistic and cultural differences in China are toned down or ignored (Hong & He 2015: 104). The descriptions of China's languages and cultural heritage in the selected systems are excellent examples of this.

There is considerable linguistic diversity in China. The Han Chinese, who represent 92% of the population on the Chinese mainland, and the Hui and Manchu minorities speak *Putonghua* (Mandarin – modern standard Chinese), but most of the other minorities speak other languages. This applies, for example, to the Tibetans in Tibet, the Uigurians in Xinjiang and the Mongols in Inner Mongolia. Approximately 120 different languages are spoken in the minority areas in China. In addition, there are such dialects as Shanghai Chinese (*Shanghaihua*) and Cantonese (*Guangdonghua*), which – if they had not been spoken in The People's Republic of China – would possible have been categorised as independent languages. The linguistic diversity in China forms a stark contrast to the picture presented of Chinese languages in the three selected systems. Out of 245 references to languages and dialects, 148 are to *Putonghua* and Han-Chinese dialects. There are 91 references to Western languages, primarily English and French. References to minority languages such as Tibetan and Mongolian, on the other hand, are virtually non-existent. There is a total of only six references (Hong & He 2015: 100-01).

The representation of Chinese cultural heritage is also extremely one-sided. In the selected systems there are 174 references to cultur-

al heritage, all of which, according to Hong and He, are historically and culturally connected to the Han-Chinese majority culture. This applies, for example, to the dragon symbol, the Chinese zodiac/Chinese astrology, the hutong houses in Beijing, The Forbidden City, The Chinese Wall, Tiananmen Square, The Tai Mountain, The Dun Huang Caves, The Silk Route and the manufacture of paper. There is not a single reference to the cultural heritage of minorities or of foreign cultural heritage in the selected systems (Hong & He 2015: 101).

## The Chinese systems do not reflect China's ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity

As the above examples indicate, the selected systems do not to any great degree reflect ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences in China locally or globally, and Hong and He use a power analysis to explain why. They write that the analysed systems 'tone down the social complexity and cultural diversity of all ethnic groups in China' and that 'the tendency to (re)present ethnic Han Chinese as the Chinese people and Han culture as Chinese culture is very pronounced' (Hong & He 2015: 105, my translation). Hong and He clearly see the representation of China as a country with one people, one language and one culture as politically motivated – it is the picture of China that the Chinese regime wishes to promote. They are not alone in thinking this. Hong and He cite two other studies that have come to the same conclusion. One is that by Curdt-Christiansen (2008), which shows that Chinese textbooks for use in Chinese teaching abroad are loaded with cultural and moral values of the Han majority. The other is that by Liu (2005), which concludes that the systems analysed uncritically promote one ideological position, while others are passed over completely (Hong & He 2015: 105). A weakness of Hong and He's analysis is that it is based on a premise that the representation of ethnicity, language and culture in the systems analysed is politically determined. This means that they refrain from considering and discussing many other possible explanations, e.g. practical considerations, pedagogical reasons or traditions regarding the composition of language teaching materials. Hong and He do not ask the question if what they find is special for educational materials in the Chinese language or something that applies in general to foreign language materials. The analysis below of the Danish-produced system indicates that this could have been a good idea.

## The representation of ethnicity, language and culture in the Danish-produced system

In the following, I will – in order to compare with the Chinese-produced systems – discuss the result of an analysis of content, intercultural and power I have carried out of (part of) a Danish-produced system of teaching materials in Chinese, *Kinesisk 1 – Kinesisk sprog for begynderne* (Bech & Nielsen 2006). The hypothesis on which I based my analysis of *Kinesisk 1* was that the system, which is published by an independent, private publishing firm in Denmark, was not to take account of the political interests of the Chinese state and would therefore be less black & white in its view of ethnicity, language and culture in China locally and in the world.

The result of my analysis indicates that three perspectives predominate in *Kinesisk 1*: a monolingual perspective, a big-city perspective and a Han-Chinese perspective:

### The monolingual perspective

Upper-secondary students using *Kinesisk 1*, learn exclusively *Putonghua*, ‘the common language’, which is based on a Han-Chinese dialect. All Chinese schoolchildren learn *Putonghua* from Class 1, and it is also *Putonghua* that is spoken on national radio and TV. So it makes good sense to teach Danish students precisely this form. *Putonghua* makes it possible to communicate with (almost) all Chinese. Even so, the one-sided focus on *Putonghua* can become a problem issue. When China’s linguistic diversity is not formulated and used actively in the lessons in *Kinesisk 1*, this indirectly supports the idea or ideology that Chinese only speak one language: *Putonghua*.

### The big-city perspective

The cultural notes in *Kinesisk 1* are dominated by a Han-Chinese, big-city perspective that corresponds to the cultural heritage discourse in the Chinese-produced systems. Practically nothing is related about other cities than Beijing, the capital of China and the centre of the Han-Chinese areas in China. Beijing is mentioned repeatedly and in many different contexts. In the notes that conclude lesson 7, there is information about Tiananmen Square in Beijing and the fact that there are plans to increase the standard of public toilets in the city. Lesson 11 concludes with a cultural note about shopping in Beijing, and lesson 13 with one about what those employed at Beijing Hotel

say when answering the telephone. In the recurrent dialogues and cultural notes, on the other hand, there are no examples of cities, places or regions where ethnic minorities mainly live. They are simply not represented at all. Nor are there any references to the Chinese diasporas where millions of Chinese live. To upper secondary students with no prior knowledge of China and Chinese the Han-Chinese big-city perspective can easily create a false impression of Chinese as Han-Chinese big-city people who live on the Chinese mainland.

## A Han-Chinese perspective

Inspired by Hong and He, I have – with the aid of a quantitative content analysis – counted which ethnic groups feature in the dialogues in *Kinesisk 1*. My count shows that only two of the five ethnic groups Hong and He operate with in their analysis, i.e. Han Chinese and Westerners (North Americans and Europeans), feature in *Kinesisk 1*. Foreign Chinese, ethnic minorities in China and other nationalities are completely absent from the dialogues. So *Kinesisk 1* provides to an even lesser extent than the three Chinese systems the ethnic diversity in China and the world.

In the cultural notes that each chapter in *Kinesisk 1* concludes with I have also counted the examples of cultural heritage, art and literature. A few buildings and locations are mentioned in the cultural notes: The Forbidden City, The Temple of Heaven (chapter 2) and Tiananmen Square (lesson 7), all of which lie in Beijing. In the cultural notes that conclude lesson 12 there is an introduction to the Chinese zodiac/Chinese astrology, which must also be said to belong to the Chinese cultural heritage. As far as art is concerned, calligraphy is introduced as one of the four classical art forms in the cultural notes after lesson 5. The three others, which are only listed, are painting, opera and poetry. There are no references to the art of Chinese ethnic minorities or foreign art in *Kinesisk 1*. With regard to literature, only one literary work is referred to in the cultural notes of *Kinesisk 1*. After lesson 10 an introduction is given to the novel *The Dream about the red room* (Honglou meng), which is part of Han-Chinese culture. Irrespective of whether one looks at ethnicity, cultural heritage, art or literature, the Han-Chinese perspective is extremely prominent in *Kinesisk 1*.

Even though ethnic minorities in China, the West and Western culture are mentioned in a few places in *Kinesisk 1*, the gallery of persons in the dialogues, the one-sided focus on *Putonghua*, the central

positioning of Beijing in the cultural notes, the absence of references to cities and area where ethnic minorities primarily live, and the main emphasis on culture that Han Chinese identify themselves with all give the reader an over-simplified and one-sided impression of ethnicity, language and culture in China. So one must conclude that neither the three Chinese systems nor the part of the Danish system analysed here provide an adequate picture of the ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of The People's Republic of China and the outside world. The next question that naturally arises is why this is so.

### Why are the Chinese- and Danish-produced systems in Chinese so relatively identical?

Apparently, it does not make all that much difference if one uses the Chinese- or Danish-produced systems when teaching Chinese. It has not been possible to prove the hypothesis that the Danish system would be more nuanced in its representation of ethnicity, language and culture than the selected Chinese ones.

Hong and He, as well as a number of other researchers, produce strong arguments to support the view that the representation of ethnicity, language and culture in the Chinese systems is politically coloured and promotes one ideology at the expense of others. But what is the significance of the representation in the Danish system resembling that of the Chinese systems so much? Does it mean that the Danish publisher and the Danish authors share the views of the Chinese state? Not necessarily, but one cannot – if one takes the analysis of power as one's point of departure – exclude the possibility that the publisher and/or the authors have omitted subjects and points of view that the Chinese regime would not approve of. We may be dealing with conscious or unconscious self-censorship here. The representation of China as a monocultural and an ethnically and linguistically homogeneous country in *Kinesisk 1* can also be pedagogically motivated. Because some students feel it is a great challenge to learn Chinese, the authors can, for pedagogical reasons, have chosen to concentrate on one particular kind: *Putonghua*, one geographical area: the Han-Chinese heartland and one culture: that of the Han majority. Practical considerations, e.g. limited access to illustrative and video material have, according to one of the authors of *Kinesisk 1*, also played a role here.<sup>2</sup> The price paid for these possible choices is an over-simplified representation of the ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity that otherwise typifies China. Finally, the representation of ethnicity, language and culture in *Kinesisk 1* may be due

to traditions of genre within the subject of Chinese. This can be confirmed or refuted on the basis of studies of language-teaching systems in Chinese produced in other countries than China and Denmark. When one prepares new teaching materials in Chinese, one need hardly start completely from scratch. One typically takes materials as one's starting point that already exist, and this may be one of the reasons why teaching systems in languages, no matter whether it is Chinese, Danish or German, often closely resemble each other with regard to choice of subjects, division into chapters, vocabulary, etc. The genre traditions are apparently so strong that one can easily end up copying prevalent ideologies and perspectives unless one makes a very conscious effort not to do so. This may very well be the case with the Chinese systems and *Kinesisk 1*.

## Notes

1. Hanban, among other activities, runs Confucius Institutes throughout the world, which seek to spread knowledge about the Chinese language outside China and to promote knowledge of Chinese culture through cultural cooperation. In Denmark there are Confucius

Institutes at Copenhagen Business School, The Royal Danish Academy of Music and Aarhus University.

2. Conversation with the author Lene Sønderby Bech at a course on Chinese subject-matter didactics (Subject-matter Didactics in Chinese), Århus, 24 November 2015.

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