Mother Tongue Education and Ethnic Identity of Malaysian Chinese Secondary School Students

Pei Yao Ho¹, Fong Peng Chew², PhD & Ker Pong Thock³, PhD.

¹,²Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Art and Social Science
²Department of Language & Literacy Education, Faculty of Education
University of Malaya, Malaysia.

Email: ¹liv_ho@yahoo.com, ²fpchew@um.edu.my, ³kpthock@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT:

Education and ethnic identity are two contentious issues in multi-ethnic society that need more subtle researches. In Malaysia, the mother tongue education for Chinese is intertwined historically with their identity maintenance but short of current empirical findings. This study aims to find out the relationship between mother tongue education and ethnic identity of Malaysian Chinese students from independent Chinese secondary schools (ICSS). The study focuses first on students' ethnic identity, then demographic factors and factors pertaining education. The educational factors are language proficiency, language usage, school environment and school activities. Data will be collected through survey questionnaire with items rated on 5-point Likert scale. Data analysis will make use of the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). Further development of mother tongue education can be revised with regard to the understanding of its relation to Malaysian Chinese ethnic identity.

Keywords: Mother tongue education, ethnic identity, Malaysian Chinese, secondary school students.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Pei Yao Ho, Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Art and Social Science, University of Malaya, 50603, Kuala Lumpur. E-mail: liv_ho@yahoo.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysian Chinese as Chinese overseas migrated from China in substantial number especially during the 19th century British colonialism. During the post-colonialism period, a great number of Chinese in Malaysia chose to stay and more Chinese are born locally to become Malaysian citizens. Malaysian Chinese today is an ethnic group with total population of 24.6% in year 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011). They are significant minority in numbers as compare to 67.4% Malays, 7.3% Indians and 0.7% other ethnics. Malaysian Chinese together with other ethnic groups framed the multi-ethnic society.

Malaysian Chinese are well-known of the most comprehensive mother tongue education up until tertiary level. Mother tongue language, Chinese Mandarin is used as the language of instruction concurrently with the learning of the language. Mother tongue language is vital for the reproduction and maintenance of culture – that is, the system of beliefs, values, norms, practice, symbols and ideas, so, “the quintessential symbol of a culture” (Tan & Santhiram, 2010). In other words, mother tongue language and cultures are important substances where the life and soul of an ethnic group rooted.

Mother tongue education is seen as the heart of life for ethnic Chinese, as declared by Lim Lian Geok, the soul of Malaysian Chinese: “Mother tongue education and human life are equally important.” Mother tongue language is regarded as a symbol of heritage and ethnicity and education is the platform for the transmission of the language, culture and values. Malaysia Chinese make every effort to maintain education in their mother tongue. The usage and recognition of the mother tongue language in the national education system is a prerequisite for ethnic minority to preserve culture and ethnic identity (Tan, 2007; Watson, 2007). Thus, the maintenance of Chinese language is thought to be associated with the maintenance of Chinese values and the continuity of Chinese ethnic identity.

A complete mother tongue education system is regarded the most accessible and effective weapon to disseminate and preserve Chinese language, as well