Constructing Chinese Identity Through the Chinese Language: A Comparative Study of Two Different Secondary Education Systems in Malaysia

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Abstract: Chinese Malaysians retain a distinct Chinese identity in a multicultural nation and highly appraise the ethnic-based and cultural importance of the Chinese language. Based on a social psychological perspective, this study employs a survey method with multiple-choice and open-ended questions to examine Chinese identity and the issues of Chinese language from the micro and macro level in two different education systems. By comparing two contrasting educational systems of Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSS) and National Secondary Schools (NSS), this paper with 890 respondents argues that the Chinese identity is constructed through the different degree of learning, using and understanding of Chinese language in the students’ respective educational contexts. Results of statistical analysis reveal significant higher score in NSS sample with a more salient Chinese identity despite having a disadvantaged learning environment for the Chinese language. The comparative analysis sought to provide significant justification and discussion of the Chinese identity construction of Chinese secondary school students.

Keywords: Chinese identity, ethnic identity, identity construction, language education, secondary education, multicultural society.

The categorization of people into different ethnic groups is common in multicultural nations as a result of decolonization in the last century, migration and transnational movement in the modern world. Ethnic group members are categorized by the commonalities in contrast to the distinctiveness of other ethnic groups. Among the shared characteristics for ethnic groupings are descent, history, culture, ancestral homeland, values, and customs. One of the important determinants to bring about the in-group togetherness and inter-group separateness is language (Schernerhorn, 1970; Yinger, 1986). The use of the same language allows the people not only to communicate and understand each other well but also able to create social relatedness and ethnic sense of belonging. In this case, language functions as a central factor to keep members of an ethnolinguistic group as a collective entity while segregating them from those who speak another language.

Inextricably linked with culture, language for an ethnic group is the way of life, the way of thought, the