Chinese Students’ Ethnic Identity: A Contextual Comparison in Three Types of Malaysian Secondary Schools

Pei Yao Ho1,*, Fong Peng Chew2, and Ker Pong Thock1

1Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Art and Social Science, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2Department of Language and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

In a multi-ethnics country, schools are contextual facts indispensable to students’ ethnic identity. Taking three types of different secondary schools in consideration, this study examined whether Malaysian Chinese students’ ethnic identity is related to educational contextual facts. A total of 276 survey respondents were recruited from a national secondary school (NSS), a national type secondary school (NTSS) and an independent Chinese secondary school (ICSS). Two aspects of ethnic identity were assessed and statistically correlated with school factors on the whole, the factors of school environment and Chinese language teacher specifically. Statistical analyses indicated significantly different school factors between NSS and NTSS, and between NSS and ICSS. Hence forth, the findings suggested that school factors are predicting Malaysian Chinese students’ ethnic identity.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Malaysian Chinese, Secondary School Students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity, known as a form of social identity, is about the relationship between the individual’s personal interpretations of his or her ethnicity and the sociocultural constructions to that particular ethnicity. The sociocultural constructions happen in the environmental context determined by space and time. The contexts of development: culture, society, family, peers, school and working environments, are a range of contexts identified by in which the individual’s sense of identity is built. A number of contextual factors were investigated by researchers and showed significant influences on ethnic identity for adolescents and emerging adults, for instance family ethnic socialization, engagement in cultural activities and traditions, ethnic density and comparative group context and peers interaction.

2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

There is a trend for Malaysian Chinese to undergo Chinese education nowadays because of its value, either ethnically or instrumentally. Chinese education is recognized as the most accessible and effective instrument to disseminate and preserve Chinese language, as well as establish Chinese culture and worldview. In other words, education is powerful to shape an individual’s identity ethnically and culturally. At such, Chinese primary school has emerged to be the first enrolment choice for Chinese parents. Statistic showed that more than 90% Chinese parents are sending their children to Chinese primary schools. After six years in Chinese primary school, they have to make a decision whether to enroll in national or independent secondary school. There are three types of secondary schools to accommodate majority of the Chinese students. These are the national secondary school (NSS), national type secondary school (NTSS) and independent Chinese secondary school (ICSS). NSS and NTSS are practically schools under government’s administration but differ in social historical context. NTSS are perceived as more Chinese oriented under such circumstances.

ICSS are those schools insist on using Chinese language in teaching. One of the goals of education in ICSS is to well preserve Chinese education and propagate Chinese culture in the Chinese community. A total of 60 ICSS are offering Chinese education in the country. Due to the limited capacity in NTSS and ICSS, most of the Chinese students have to enroll in NSS. In a statistic survey, students enroll in NSS and NTSS are 70% and 20% respectively while only a minority of 10% enrolls in ICSS. In life of a secondary school student, school is one of the immediate place and space located in the instant moment to give impacts on his or her personality, self-image and social
connection to others. Research findings have showed that school contextual factors are able to affect the formation of students’ ethnic identity.\textsuperscript{11–13} Therefore, this study aims to find out the relationship between Chinese secondary school students’ ethnic identity and the school context.

3. PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

There is a research gap concerning the relationship between the construct of ethnic identity and the schools factors in the Malaysian context. Thus, working from a socio-psychological perspective of ethnic identity, this study focuses on secondary schools as the ecological contextual factors. The study addresses the following research objectives:

1. To find out whether there is a significant difference in ethnic identity among Chinese students studying in NSS, NTSS and ICSS.
2. To examine whether there is a significant difference in schools factors as perceived by students among NSS, NTSS and ICSS.
3. To examine whether there is a relationship between secondary school students’ ethnic identity and school factors.
4. To investigate if school factor is significant predictor to ethnic identity among Malaysian Chinese secondary school students.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Sites Selection and Participants

Three schools were selected in this study, each from NSS, NTSS and ICSS. All three schools are located in the city of Selangor state. ICSS has high concentration of Chinese students and teachers. NTSS is relatively homogenous in terms of students of ethnic Chinese but not teachers of ethnic Chinese while the composition of students NSS is a mixture of all ethnicities. Table I shows the percentage of Chinese students and teachers in the respective schools.

Participants were 276 Chinese students recruited from NSS ($n = 86$), NTSS ($n = 84$) and ICSS ($n = 106$). All of the students participated in the self-administered survey were 16 years of age and studying form 4. A total of 44.2% of the respondents were males and 55.8% were females. All participants were former Chinese primary schools students. Respondents from NSS and NTSS were taking Chinese language as a study subject.

4.2. Instrument of Study

The data in this study were collected by employing self-administered survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed in Chinese language for students’ better understanding. The questionnaire comprises of three sections:

(a) Demographic information,
(b) ethnic identity measures and
(c) school factors.

In Section A, basic demographic background were asked in this section, including gender, religion, stream of study, sub-ethnic group, family socio-economic status and parents’ highest level of education.

Under Section B, ethnic identity was measured by adapting Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)\textsuperscript{14} in the context focusing the target group of this study. The original MEIM was developed with 14 items which is suitable across diverse ethnic groups. Alpha value for internal consistency for the adapted MEIM version in this study was 0.81.

MEIM assesses three aspects of sense of belonging, ethnic identity achievement (exploration and commitment) and ethnic behavior towards one’s ethnicity. Examples of the items were “I have a strong sense of belonging to Malaysian Chinese ethnic group,” “I feel a strong attachment towards Malaysian Chinese ethnic group,” “I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly Chinese people” and “I have spent time trying to find out more about Chinese ethnic group, such as the history, traditions and customs.” Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from point 1 (strongly disagree) to point 5 (strongly agree).

Section C focused on two aspects of school factors from students’ perception. The subscales are the school environment on the whole and Chinese language teacher in regard to the extent of supporting the promotion of ethnic identity. Five items were constructed for each aspects to be rated on Likert scale of end point $1$ (strongly disagree) to point $5$ (strongly agree). School environment comprised of items such as “I think my school respects Chinese culture” and “Celebrating Chinese festivals is a tradition in my school.” Items for Chinese language teacher included “I like to attend Chinese language class because my teacher’s teaching is interesting” and “My Chinese language teacher tells us Chinese folk stories in Chinese language class.” School factors demonstrated reliable Cronbach’s alpha, 0.84 for both subscales together, 0.88 and 0.83 for school environment and for Chinese language teacher respectively.

4.3. Analysis on MEIM

14 items in MEIM were subjected to a factor analysis to examine the underlying aspects of the ethnic identity construct. Consistent with the empirical analysis based on the theoretical approaches for ethnic identity,\textsuperscript{15} two-factor loadings were confirmed in this study across all type of schools. The 2 factors solution explained 40.3% of the total variance. Factor 1 was made up of 8 items reflecting the aspects of affirmation, belonging and commitment. The remaining 6 items were loaded in factor 2 to reflect the aspects of active participation and exploration. Reliability for the two factors in all the type of schools ranged from 0.65 to 0.81. As a result, these two factors were used in the subsequent analysis in the effort to unravel the relationship between ethnic identity and school factors in details.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity was examined whether there were schools differences. Overall ethnic identity score is slightly higher from the neutral 3-point score ($M = 3.41 \pm SD = 0.46$). However, there was no significant difference for ethnic identity, as well as the two subscales among Chinese students studying in

Table I. Percentage (%) of Chinese students and teachers in the respective schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>Chinese students</th>
<th>Chinese teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTSS</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>43.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICSS</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NSS ($M = 3.46 \pm SD = 0.41$), NTSS ($M = 3.33 \pm SD = 0.41$) and ICSS ($M = 3.44 \pm SD = 0.52$) with ($F(2, 273) = 1.79, p = 0.17$).

### 5.2. School Factors

One-way ANOVA in Table III showed significant differences between groups for school factors among the type of schools ($F(2, 273) = 8.78, p = 0.00$), as well as the subscales, school environment ($F(2, 273) = 56.29, p = 0.00$) and Chinese language teacher ($F(2, 273) = 3.31, p = 0.04 < 0.05$) in particular. At the significant level of 0.05, Tukey HSD post-hoc comparison revealed that NSS ($M = 3.57 \pm SD = 0.53$) was statistically different from NTSS ($M = 3.81 \pm SD = 0.61$) and ICSS ($M = 3.91 \pm SD = 0.53$) on school factors. There was no statistically significant difference between NTSS and ICSS on school factors.

In addition, statistically differences were found by using Tukey HSD test between all the pairs in comparison.

The differences occurred between NSS ($M = 3.32 \pm SD = 0.57$) to NTSS ($M = 4.00 \pm SD = 0.67$) and ICSS ($M = 4.24 \pm SD = 0.59$), and between NTSS to ICSS. In contrast, NSS ($M = 3.82 \pm SD = 0.63$) and ICSS ($M = 3.57 \pm SD = 0.70$) were the only pair to yield a statistically difference on the Chinese language teacher subscale. There were no significant differences between NTSS to NSS and ICSS. Table IV summaries the $p$ value for post-hoc Tukey HSD test for significant difference for all the possible comparison between types of schools.

Table III. Analysis of one way ANOVA comparing school factors, school environment and Chinese language teacher according to the type of schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Variation</th>
<th>Sum of square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean square</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School factors</td>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>84,508</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>89,944</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>174,452</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School environment</td>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>41,710</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20.86</td>
<td>56.29</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>101,141</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>142,851</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese language teacher</td>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>3,194</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>131,538</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>134,732</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table IV. Tukey HSD $p$-value for significant difference between types of schools at significant level — 0.05.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of schools</th>
<th>School factors</th>
<th>School environment</th>
<th>Chinese language teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>NTSS</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTSS</td>
<td>ICSS</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICSS</td>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3. The Relationship Between Ethnic Identity and School Factors

There was statistically significant correlation between ethnic identity score and school factors ($rs = 0.43, p = .00$) at 0.01 significant level. The two subscales of ethnic identity showed almost identical results in relation to school factors, for factor 1 (affirmation, belonging and commitment) ($rs = 0.39, p = .00$) and for factor 2 (active participation and exploration) ($rs = 0.35, p = .00$). Additionally, strong support was found for the relationship between ethnic identity and school factors. Results from Spearman’s rho indicated significant correlation between each aspect of ethnic identity and school factors across all types of schools.

5.4. Predictors to Students’ Ethnic Identity

Table VI shows multiple regressions analysis of all the indices in school factors on ethnic identity of the respondents. The sub-scale of school environment and Chinese language teacher were used in a standard multiple regression analysis to determine the predictor of ethnic identity. The model was accounted for approximately 20% of the variance of ethnic identity. Chinese language teacher ($\beta = 0.40, t = 7.05, p = .00$) is a significant stronger predictor than school environment ($\beta = 0.14, t = 2.43, p = .02$) for students’ ethnic identity. On the other hand, $R^2$ and adjusted $R^2$ value of school environment and Chinese language teachers ($R^2 = 0.21$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.20$) were good predictors of ethnic identity among the students.

6. DISCUSSION

Research findings have suggested higher ethnic identity score and more salient identity among adolescents when they were the
minority attending a school with high density of peers of other ethnic groups. In contrast to this view, Malaysian Chinese secondary school students demonstrated similar level of ethnic identity across all types of schools. Given that there were differences among schools types and the factors which had been investigated in this study, no differences were found in their ethnic identity regardless which dimensions, either affirmation, belonging and commitment or active participation and exploration. The findings in this study were rather identical to Refs. [5, 17]. The school ethnic composition did not really contribute to Malaysian Chinese secondary school students’ ethnic identity issue.

School factors as perceived by the students were found to be significantly different between NSS and NTSS, as well as NSS and ICSS. Both NSS and NTSS are government public schools which implement the same syllabus, the same public examinations and use Malay language as the medium of instructions. The differences happen at the daily interaction level pertain to the immediate ecological context as indicated in the analysis. The social environment in NSS is relatively heterogeneous with diverse ethnic students and teachers composition. Chinese language classes are conducted when based on the demand of at least 15 students per class. In comparison, NTSS comprise of high percentage of ethnic Chinese students. Although Malay language is used in curricular, Chinese language is taught as an elective subject in formal education. Students in NTSS are provided more opportunities than NSS students to activities and events which are ethnically Chinese.

There were significant differences in overall school factors, school environment and Chinese language teacher factors between NSS and ICSS. The structure in ICSS are completely different from NSS in regard to the syllabus, administration, school traditions and culture, examinations, language of instruction and so on. Being the only type of schools that are providing Chinese education, the social environment in ICSS is relatively homogenous with high density of Chinese students and teachers. In ICSS, Chinese language is the main communication language and the medium for teaching and learning across all study subjects. Thence, it is not surprising to learn that school factors between NSS and ICSS were significantly different.

In line with previous studies, this study showed the micro-level school settings were related to students’ identity. Statistically correlations were found between ethnic identity and schools factors in all three schools. In other words, school environment and Chinese language teachers are two aspects that influenced Chinese students’ ethnic identity. In a comparison research between NSS and ICSS found that school environment was important influences to the perception of Chinese values among secondary school students. Both samples viewed Chinese values as equally important but in different domains. However, this study did not explicate in which aspect of the school environment had influenced students’ perception.

In the current study, school factors were also limited to whether the general school environment is conducive and supportive to the learning of Chinese language and culture. The climate of schools that promotes identity features would contribute to students’ identity development. For the aspect of Chinese language teachers, the concerns are on teachers’ knowledge and attitude towards Chinese language and culture.

In addition to the correlations, school factors are significant predictors to Chinese secondary school students’ ethnic identity. The findings are in accordance with previous studies, A Chinese language teacher was a stronger predictor compared to school environment. The reason of this might due to the person-to-person interaction and communication. Teachers are role models to provide character and moral education to students. They are able to impact students’ life greatly and influence students’ identity development. Rich and Schachter revealed that teachers as role models is a potent variable in predicting students’ identity development.

Therefore, teachers should become the leading person, initiating the process of identity search. Teachers should encourage and motivate students to learn more about their ethnic background and values, and others’ culture as well. For Chinese language teachers, they have the responsibility to bring out the best of Chinese traditions and values so that Chinese students will build up a positive ethnic image. Besides that, school administrators should furnish an environment with mutual respect. Every party in school together can create a robust environment to preserve the culture and heritage of each ethnic group so that the young generation feel proud of their identity in a multicultural country.

This study did not include other-group-orientation as both NTSS and ICSS are both ethnic homogenous environment. However, future study should consider this aspect as it is regarded part of the ethnic identity construct. The study of Malaysian Chinese ethnic identity should also put into a broader frame of society level for investigation. At such, the shifting and multidimensional nature of ethnic identity can be conceptualized more accurately within a complicated society.

7. CONCLUSION

By comparing the school-contextual factors, this study shed light on Malaysian Chinese secondary school students’ ethnic identity. The study has provided evidence and shown on the significant relationship between school factors and Chinese students’ ethnic identity despite no significant difference in ethnic identity among them who study in different type of schools. School factors were significantly different as perceived by students from those schools and predicted their ethnic identity. The understanding of ethnic identity has implications on the educational planning and inter-ethnic relations in a multi-ethnic society. Schools as the platform for ethnic identity formation should be sensitive and positive to embrace ethnic diversity and multiculturalism.

References and Notes
