RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

**Pei Yao Ho, Fong Peng Chew, and Ker Pong Thock**
University of Malaya, Malaysia
liv_ho@yahoo.com

**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 (Schermerhorn, 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

way of valuing, and the human reality (Fishman, 1996). Common among ethnic minority groups, language is often a unique part of life that people want to pass on as an ancestor's legacy and knowledge. As an overseas Chinese community who have long settled in Malaysia, the Chinese are a significant ethnic minority group in Malaysia. They are in constant encounters with the controversial issues of language, education, and identity which play significant roles in their life. In the meantime, they retain a distinct Chinese identity in a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation. The saliency of being Chinese Malaysians are largely influenced by the government's policies, the Malay majority status vis-a-vis non-Malay minority status, and the communal demands on social, economic, and political interests in the country. In this context, the preservation of the Chinese language and education (Mandarin Chinese) is often stressed as the basic right crucial to keep the Chinese culture and identity as a distinct image (Renou, 1998; Tan & Santhiram, 2010).

Taking the Chinese language as an ancestors' precious inheritance, Chinese Malaysians highly appraise the ethnic-base and cultural importance of the language. At a different level of acceptance and practice, Chinese Malaysians welcome Chinese education as a part of their heritage. Chinese education, along with a second or third language, has so far been the educational reality, especially at the primary education level. However, the threats of eliminating Chinese education are constantly felt. In particular, Chinese education as the comprehensive mother tongue education or the learning of the language exclusively remains controversial at the national stage. Within the Chinese community, Chinese language and Chinese education are utilized as ethnic-based features to unite them as an ethnic minority group, symbolizing their identity.

## Who are the Chinese?
## Chinese Identity in Malaysian Context

Following the British colonialism in the 19th century, a massive number of Chinese migrated from China to settle down in Malaya. Since then, from sojourners and immigrants, the Chinese are born locally in Malaya and become part of the multi-ethnic community. During the post-colonialism period, Chinese in Malaya chose to stay and became loyal citizens to the new country

which was then about to be born. Chinese in Malaysia formed the largest percentage of Chinese minority in Southeast Asia during the early years of independence. According to statistics, the Chinese population in Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak, and Sabah is 2.7 million out of 7.35 million, 0.4 million in a total of 0.76 million and 0.11 million in a total of 0.48 million respectively (Purcell, 1964). This made up of 37.4% of the total population in Malaysia in the early years of independence.

The classification of Chinese Malaysians as an ethnic group can be traced back during the British colonial administration. In the modern census of the Straits Settlements dated back to 1891, "Chinese," with the inclusion of Chinese dialect groups, was sorted as an ethnic category (Hirschman, 1987). Therefore, ethnic Chinese is a racial category given to the citizens of Chinese descents. This is based on the biological means of categorization. Although originating from the same *Han minzu* (ethnic), Chinese Malaysians are heterogeneous depending on their sub-ethnic groups of spoken dialects. However, Chinese (Mandarin) language is considered as the mother tongue for all.

Chinese Malaysians today are offspring of the Chinese a few centuries ago and of those who have contributed to the independence, the formation, and the development of Malaysia. The national census showed that from the total population in Malaysia of 32 million, there are 7.4 million (23.2%) Chinese, while the rest of the population are 68.8% Malays, 7% Indians, and 1% other ethnics (Malaysia Department of statistics, 2017). Chinese Malaysians preserve their unique ancestral, cultural tradition, and language successfully. From the authoritative defined to everyday life, the Chinese remain as a distinct ethnic group in the country. Ethnicity becomes apparent because of the ethnic identity that one has to shoulder from the day he or she is born. As an ethnic group integrated into a multi-ethnic society, from the most localized to the least culturally localized, Chinese Malaysians still maintain a monolithic ethnic status because of the historical influences (Tong, 2010).

In studying of the phenomenon of Chinese diaspora—Chinese overseas and Chinese identities in Southeast Asia in a broader sense, and Chinese in Malaysia in particular—seven types of identities emerged, including historical identity, Chinese nationalist identity, communal identity, national (local)

identity, cultural identity, ethnic identity, and class identity (Wang, 1988). Among these concepts, Wang (1988) commented that the Chinese ethnic identity is reasonably accepted after the formation of Malaysia in 1963 because it implies a broader meaning, covers race and culture, from a minority political dimension. Therefore, the Chinese identity is meaningful for Chinese Malaysians as the individual and collective sense of ethnic identification relatively to the Malay majority as well as other ethnic groups.

Emphasizing on the local contextual influences on identity, scholars believed that the Chinese language and education indeed play a decisive role in constructing, preserving, and consolidating Chinese identity among Chinese Malaysians (Hou, 2006; Lee, 2014; Lim, 1999; Tong, 2010). Through a detailed study of Chinese secondary education in Malaysia, Ku (2003) argued that the Chinese identity is shaped in the process of the establishment of Chinese education since pre-war and it continues in the long run. His analysis showed that Chinese ethnic consciousness is invoked through the common desire to retain Chinese culture and education. Moving from secondary education, Tsao (2010) argued that a Chinese identity is formed in Malaysian context through the desires, needs, struggles, negotiations, and compromises to set up Chinese tertiary education.

Alternatively, Tan (2004) argued that as far as the Chinese language functions as cultural expression; the persistence of Chinese ethnic identification does not necessarily result in the maintenance of the language. With special reference to Malaysian Chinese, he categorized four types of Chinese identities according to the language of intimacy, language of literacy, and intra-group language usage. The classification depends on the language usage at home and the education they went through. Type A and B Chinese usually identify themselves as "pure Chinese" as they prefer to use Chinese language and can speak at least a Chinese dialect. Type B Chinese are just fine in speaking but type A Chinese are literate in Chinese language and generally Chinese educated with more knowledge and interest in Chinese history, philosophy, and civilization. In comparison, type C Chinese are those who cannot speak Chinese language or dialects and prefer non-Chinese even during intragroup communication. They are the acculturated Chinese, usually referred as "Baba" in Melaka. Type D Chinese are also acculturated Chinese, but they can speak a creolized Chinese dialect such as the Peranakan in Kelantan. Referring to the case of "Baba," the main argument of this classification is that Chinese still identify themselves as ethnically Chinese even when language as an objective cultural aspect discontinued.

As scholars review, Chinese identity in Malaysian context is multidimensional, socially and culturally localized, and associated with different symbols in a changing situation (Shamsul, 1999; Tan, 1997, 2000; Yao, 2009). The young generation of Chinese Malaysians are being born and raised up as Malaysians. They do not carry the direct historical burden from Japanese invasion and occupation, British colonialism, and series of incidents leading to the independence and the formation of Malaysia. Although family line and lineage are descended from the Chinese ancestors, their identity is bounded to the present day localization, space, and experiences. As a matter of fact, the identity of the Chinese Malaysian students is a socio-psychological construct bounded by the current complexity of Malaysian education context.

## Two Different Secondary Education Systems

Chinese education in Malaysia is internationally well-known and recognized as South-East Asia's most comprehensive (Minority Rights Group, 1992). Formal education with the Chinese language as the medium of instruction, as well as a single standalone language subject, is promised under the Malaysian National Educational System with terms and conditions. National Chinese Primary Schools (NCPS), or vernacular schools, have always been part of the national mainstream education ever since the country's independence with "Malaysianized" curriculum. NCPS have become the priority educational choice for Chinese parents. According to the statistical report, the percentage of enrolment of Chinese students increased from 92% in the year 2000 to 96% in 2011; the number of students reached 571,315 in the year 2014 (United Chinese Schools Teacher's Association, 2015).

At the secondary school level, various possible educational tracks are offering a different medium of education and school experiences to Chinese Malaysian students. The diversity of educational background of Chinese Malaysians makes their language life and ethnic identification more complicated.

National Secondary Schools (NSS) and Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSS) are both common among Chinese primary school graduates. NSS are Malay-medium government schools while ICSS are Chinese-medium private schools. The statistical survey showed that the majority, about 70% of these Chinese students, would enroll in NSS ("The massive increase of National-type Secondary School Students," 2013). ICSS are able to receive only a small percentage, approximately 10% of the NCPS graduates, due to the limited enrolment available in these schools.

NSS and ICSS are two completely different education systems historically as well as structurally. Among the obvious present-day structural differences between NSS and ICSS are the language for classroom instruction, students' ethnic composition, curriculum planning and examination, schools' overall culture, and so on. TABLE 1 showed the main characteristics in comparison for both types of school.

Post-independence era witnessed the setting up of NSS as a continuity of national primary schools following national education planning. The country's national education aims to bring students of all ethnicity under one roof to provide the social and integrative experience of living together in respect, peace, and harmony. According to Baki (1953/1981), the purpose of national schools by virtue of their multi-ethnic composition and deliberate policy of assimilation is to function as melting pots of Malaysian pluralism. NSS, therefore, is thought to be the best system of education to gather and unite Malaysians of all ethnicities and as a result, a sense of national identity can be constructed.

Hence, in accordance to 1956 Razak Report （Ministry of Education, 1956） which emphasized the ultimate objective to establish one medium for education, the Malay language was adopted as the main medium of instruction, and a Malaysia-orientated curriculum was formulated.

NSS employ Malay medium of instruction in all academic subjects except English and people's own language (POL). POL for Chinese students in this regard is the Chinese language. The Chinese language class would only be conducted by requirements of 15 or more parents (Tan, 2014). Also, the amount of time allocated to the Chinese language as an academic subject per week is far shorter relatively to ICSS. In NSS, the Chinese language is an optional academic subject offered to Chinese students. A lot of Chinese students give up on their POL by the first or second year of secondary schooling due to the lack of motivation. The low percentage of A achievers in SPM, the Form 5 public examination, is also another hindrance for them to persist in Chinese language learning (Ho, 2016).

Offering free education, NSS are the country's mainstream and the most accessible educational option for Chinese Malaysian students. In NSS, Chinese students are exposed to Malay-centered learning environment together with peers of various ethnicity. Although ethnically heterogeneous, Malay students comprise the majority relatively to students of other ethnic groups. Malay culture is the norm and dominant in this type of school. Some NSS may have Chinese students as the major ethnic composition depending on the residential areas with high Chinese concentration,

**Table 1.** *Main Characteristics of NSS and ICSS*

| Characteristic | NSS | ICSS |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Medium of instruction | Malay | Chinese |
| Curriculum planning | Ministry of Education | United Chinese Schools Committee Association (UCSCA) |
| Examination | Malaysian Certificate of Examination (SPM) | Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) |
| Total years of education | 5 | 6 |
| Students' ethnic composition | Heterogeneous with Malay majority | Mainly Chinese |
| Time allocated to Chinese language as an academic subject per week | Approximately 120 minutes | Approximately 280 minutes |

*(Compiled by the author.)*

but these schools can hardly express any Chinese characteristics. More than half of the administration and teaching power in NSS are usually occupied by staffs of Malay ethnicity.

On the other hand, the ICSS system is a legacy that resulted from the ultimate objective of the National Education Policy. Under the rationale of 1960 Talib Report (Ministry of Education, 1960), the National Education Policy should be designed in a way to unite the people of Malaysia and promote national consciousness via one sole medium of instruction—education using the national language. This report proceeded a step further to the ultimate education objective with more stringent measures in matters relating to the use of mother tongue. The freedom of instructional choice in education which was once accorded to Chinese secondary schools is no longer allowed in the National Education System. From henceforth, all Chinese secondary schools must convert to the English medium, and later to Malay medium to become fully funded, or they would be categorized as ICSS (Lee, 2011).

Chinese education could only survive in ICSS, which are independent financially and managerially. ICSS are not accepted under the National Education System yet concurrently bounded by National Education Policy to a certain extent. Despite all restrictions and challenges, ICSS persist in the teaching and learning using the Chinese language. There are altogether 60 ICSS in Malaysia today since the educational revival which was initiated in 1973 by Chinese educationists to revitalize Chinese education (Ong, 2014). The Chinese educational revival was a success, and the number of enrolment in ICSS is at constant growth ever since. There is a rise of 31.6% in ICSS enrolment to reach the figure of 70,266 students from 2005 to 2012 (UCSCA, 2014).

ICSS are ethnically a Chinese homogenous learning environment, use the Chinese language as the medium of instruction, and present the Chinese culture. A special committee under the UCSCA monitors the curriculum planning. Among the educational objectives and visions of ICSS are to safeguard and impart ethnic culture and protect the Chinese language and education (UCSCA, 2014). Unlike the NSS 5-year system of education, ICSS students would graduate upon completing six years of education. At the end of the 6th year of schooling, they take part in UEC, an examination system exclusively for ICSS students. To date, the qualification of UEC is recognized by a lot of prestigious international universities but ironically, not by the Malaysian government. In an effort to maintain Chinese education at the secondary level, ICSS play an important role in preserving the Chinese language, culture, tradition, and identity.

## Research Objectives

Research investigating the construction of Chinese identity through Chinese language and education in Malaysian context is largely based on a top-down and macro-sociological investigation (Hou, 2006; Ku, 2003; Lim, 1999; Tong, 2010; Tsao, 2010), few are from the bottom-up approach but not the statistical analysis (Chin, Lee, Jawan, & Darshan, 2015; Lee, 2014). In an attempt to bring new lights concerning the identity of Chinese Malaysians as individual members as well as an ethnic group in whole, and its construction through Chinese language and education, the current research aims to study the research problem statistically from the perspectives of secondary school students. The objectives are as the following:

1. To examine and compare the level of Chinese identity of Malaysian secondary school students between NSS and ICSS.
2. To investigate and compare Chinese Malaysian secondary school students' perspectives on Chinese language and education between NSS and ICSS.
3. To examine and compare the main factors pertaining to Chinese language and education that contribute to Chinese identity of Malaysian secondary school students between NSS and ICSS.
4. To unravel the perspectives of NSS and ICSS students on the importance of learning the Chinese language.

## Theoretical Framework

The concept of Chinese identity among Chinese overseas, Chinese in Southeast Asia in particular, has caught immense attention among scholars in the post-war decolonization era. The Chinese maintain their Chinese identity in terms of tradition, origin, culture,

values, and way of life through their internal ties of kinship, clans, and speech groups. It is a consciousness of being Chinese that keeps them as a collective body of people from others who are not one of them. In the contemporary context, the Chinese identity is meaningful as an ethnic identity in relation to other ethnic groups. In this study, Chinese identity in the Malaysian context is studied on the basis of localized ethnic identity in a multi-ethnic society.

Chinese identity is framed as a social psychological construct by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) and theory of identity development (Erikson, 1968). Social identity pertains to the extent of individuals' cognitive and emotional dimensions being a member of a certain ethnic group. Identity developmental theory, on the other hand, posits that the identity is to be developed when the individuals engage themselves in activities of searching, meaning making, and committing to their ethnic-related contents. Thus, from the social psychological perspective, ethnic identity refers to the multidimensional concept of an individual of being, feeling, and doing as a member of a certain ethnic group (Verkuyten, 2005).

According to Roberts et al. (1999), ethnic identity was reflected in two factors as proposed by the above two theoretical approaches, namely, belonging and exploration. Belonging refers to the affective, affirmation, and commitment elements towards the ethnic membership, with pride and good feelings about the group. Exploration involves the process of inspecting, finding out, learning, and participating in the ethnic-related activities and matters. Individuals are most likely to think and rethink about a meaningful life, figuring out alternatives available, and trying to engage in possible options appropriate to the self (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). In short, individuals' ethnic identity is developed through the sense of belonging to the ethnic group, making sense of the ethnic contents, and adopting those meaningful ones in life.

An ethnic group defines the self in terms of the ethnic-defining characteristics of the group. In many cases, ethnic groups capitalize on the mother tongue as the foundation of identity, which subsequently draws the boundary between ingroup and outgroup members. The distinctiveness between ethnic groups became compelling when language connects the present with the past through its oral traditions, literary forms, music, history, and customs (Padilla, 1999). Thus, in this study, the construction of Chinese identity takes the Chinese language as the base in the process of exploring ethnic culture and contents. The Chinese language is not merely a gadget of communication, but an expression of thoughts, values, morality, and perceptions carried and manifested by Chinese identity.

Embedded in the conceptualization of identity from a social psychological approach, the process of constructing identity emphasizes social contextual factors in which individuals attend. Adams and Marshall (1996) pointed out that context is an essential character to the self and thus identity is formed through a relational person-in-context. Education, as one of the most important social context in the life of students, serves the purposeful real-life investigation. This is especially true in the case of Chinese Malaysians concerning their determination in maintaining Chinese education. As Shamsul (1999) commented, post-war Chinese identity is shaped by Chinese language and culture learning. In this comparative study, the construction of Chinese identity is examined in two completely different social and linguistic contexts.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Table 2 showed the number and percentage of research participants based on their personal background. The study included 890 Chinese Malaysian secondary school students, 448 from ICSS and 442 from NSS scattered approximately evenly in five states in Malaysia. The respondents are former Chinese primary schools students who are currently studying in upper secondary level. NSS respondents are taking the Chinese language as an academic study subject.

Majority of the respondents profess their faith in the Chinese religion while others are a minority. Chinese religion in this regard includes Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (Tan, 1983). The three major sub-ethnic groups are Hokkien, Hakka, and Teochew while four others are the minority sub-ethnic groups. A great number of respondents showed low socio-economic status in comparison to the intermediate and high based on monthly household income. Based on the definition by Khazanah Research Institute (2014), monthly household income less than RM6000 is considered low family socioeconomic status, intermediate income group (RM6001 to RM10000), and high income group

**Table 2.** *Personal Background of the Participants*

| Personal Background | | Number of Respondents | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Type of School | | | |
| | ICSS | 448 | 50.3 |
| | NSS | 442 | 49.7 |
| Gender | | | |
| | Male | 398 | 44.7 |
| | Female | 492 | 55.3 |
| States | | | |
| | Selangor | 190 | 21.3 |
| | Penang | 175 | 19.7 |
| | Kelantan | 163 | 18.3 |
| | Johor | 185 | 20.8 |
| | Sarawak | 177 | 19.9 |
| Religion | | | |
| | Chinese Religion | 736 | 82.7 |
| | Christian | 90 | 10.1 |
| | Free-thinker | 63 | 7.1 |
| | Muslim | 1 | 0.1 |
| Study Major | | | |
| | Science | 473 | 53.1 |
| | Art | 417 | 46.9 |
| Sub-ethnic Group | | | |
| | Hokkien | 349 | 39.2 |
| | Hakka | 194 | 21.8 |
| | Teochew | 146 | 16.4 |
| | Cantonese | 87 | 9.8 |
| | Hainanese | 43 | 4.8 |
| | Foochow | 36 | 4 |
| | Others | 35 | 3.9 |
| Socio-economic Status | | | |
| | Low | 686 | 77.1 |
| | Intermediate | 160 | 18 |
| | High | 44 | 4.9 |
| **Total** | | **890** | **100** |

(>RM10000). Among the respondents, all of them have Chinese fathers and majority have Chinese mothers (878), but a small number of them have mothers of other ethnicities (12).

*Instrument*

The respondents completed a self-administered survey questionnaire. In addition to personal background, the questionnaire measures Chinese identity, micro, and macro level language factors.

Chinese identity is measured by adapting the multigroup ethnic identity measure (MEIM; Roberts et al., 1999) in the context of Chinese Malaysians. There are 12 items—seven items assessing belonging and five items measuring exploration. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Example of items under belonging is "I feel a strong attachment towards Malaysian Chinese ethnic group." For exploration, item example is "I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly Chinese people." Reliability of Chinese identity is reported at Cronbach's alpha value .80.

Chinese Malaysian secondary school students' perspectives on micro Chinese language factors focused on the daily language practice and immediate response to language competence and choice. Micro Chinese language factors are Chinese language usage in daily domains (CLUD), Chinese language as study language (CLStudy), Chinese language as leisure language (CLLeisure), and Chinese language preference in ethnic-based cultural activities (CLPre). A 5-point scale is used, from 1 (never) to 5 (all the time) to rate these factors. Chinese language proficiency (CLPro) is measured by 5-point scale as well, from 1 (very weak) to 5 (very good). All factors reported reliability within the acceptable range from Cronbach's alpha value of .69 to .85.

At a macro level, language factors are assessed by students' perspectives on the broader sense of the attitude towards Chinese language and education. Two factors are measured in this category, the importance of Chinese language in life (ICLL) and comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education (CCMTE). Both ICLL and CCMTE reported acceptable Cronbach's alpha value of .79 and .71 respectively. All items are measured by using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from

1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Apart from this, the respondents are required to answer and provide reasons to an open-ended question: What do you think of the importance of learning Chinese language to you?

## Results

### *Chinese Students' Chinese Identity*

Analyzing the compared means, the independent sample $t$-test is conducted to compare Chinese identity between NSS and ICSS. Table 3 shows the comparison of Chinese identity and its separate factors, namely, belonging and exploration between the two groups. Both groups of students showed high scores (>3, the neutral point) in Chinese identity. However, this study found that ICSS Chinese Malaysian secondary school students had statistically significantly lower score in Chinese identity ($3.46 \pm 0.47$) than NSS students ($3.65 \pm 0.45$), $t$ (888) = -6.016, $p$ = .000. A close to medium effect size is reported in Cohen's $d$ = 0.41.

For Chinese identity in terms of exploration, there is also a significant difference, $t$ (888) = -4.74, $p$ = .000. ICSS students showed statistically lower score ($3.33 \pm 0.54$) in exploring Chinese identity than NSS students ($3.5 \pm 0.52$). In the case of belonging, ICSS students again scored statistically significantly lower ($3.55 \pm 0.56$) than NSS students ($3.75 \pm 0.51$), $t$ (882.71) = -5.571, $p$ = .000. Small effect size is reported for belonging (Cohen's $d$ = 0.37) and exploration (Cohen's $d$ = 0.32).

Findings from the analysis unraveled significant difference in Chinese identity in two contradistinctive educational systems. It is found that the level of Chinese identity is different in a Malay-based medium from a Chinese-based medium of instruction. Despite the disadvantaged learning environment provided for Chinese language, NSS Chinese students in the

**Table 3.** *Comparison of Chinese Identity and its Separate Factors Between ICSS and NSS*

| Dependent Variable | ICSS (N=448) | NSS (N=442) | *t*-test for Equality of Means | | | Cohen's *d* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M (SD)* | *M (SD)* | *t* | *df* | Sig. (2-tailed) | |
| Chinese identity | 3.46 (0.47) | 3.65 (0.45) | -6.016 | 888 | .000* | 0.41 |
| Belonging | 3.55 (0.56) | 3.75 (0.51) | -5.571 | 882.71 | .000* | 0.37 |
| Exploration | 3.33 (0.52) | 3.50 (0.54) | -4.74 | 888 | .000* | 0.32 |

*\*p<.05*

Malay-medium schools turned out to be the ones who identified more with their Chinese identity. In comparison, Chinese students in ICSS, being the Chinese-medium schools with the Chinese language as the main instructional and communication language, did identify with Chinese identity but to a lesser extent relative to NSS Chinese students.

In this case, Chinese identity is manifested by NSS Chinese students exclusively in a higher degree of belonging and exploration. The self-recognition to Chinese identity is salient, relevant, and valid to this group of students in a multi-ethnic, predominantly Malay environment. There are many circumstances that they need to identify with their ethnicity. On the other hand, the relatively ethnic homogenous study environment in ICSS does not evoke the sense of being different. Chinese identity to ICSS students is a norm in schools that do not need deeper consideration. The research findings replicated those previous ones where the minority students identified more with their ethnic status in a school where majority of its students are from other ethnic groups (Xu, Farver, & Pauker, 2015; Umaña-Taylor, 2004).

### Chinese Students' Perspectives on Chinese Language Factors at Micro Level

Results from the analysis of independent sample $t$-test presented by Table 4 showed a significant difference in three Chinese language factors at the micro level between ICSS and NSS Chinese students. ICSS students (4.19 ± 0.54) showed statistically higher score than NSS students (3.98 ± 0.55) in CLUD, $t$ (888) = 5.777, $p$ = .000 with small effect size (Cohen's $d$ = 0.39). ICSS students (4.41 ± 0.69) again had statistically higher score in comparison to NSS students (2.54 ± 1.11) in CLStudy, $t$ (739.702) = 30.214, $p$ = .000 with large effect size reported in Cohen's $d$ = 2.02. For CLPro, $t$ (862.105) = 2.069, $p$ = .039, ICSS students (3.56 ± 0.73) had statistically higher score than NSS students (3.47 ± 0.61) and reported a small effect size (Cohen's $d$ = 0.13). There is no statistically significant difference between the two groups of Chinese students in terms of CLLeisure and CLPre.

At the micro level, the findings revealed the real-life frequency of Chinese language practice and Chinese language competence between ICSS and NSS Chinese students. The persistence of using the Chinese language in education is revealed through the frequency of Chinese language usage and proficiency of ICSS Chinese students. Without a doubt, ICSS Chinese students had higher proficiency and usage of the Chinese language in various common domains in the daily life including school. In Chinese-medium schools, they also use the Chinese language more in their study compared to Chinese students in NSS. The large effect size in the Chinese language as study language might indicate such juxtaposition of these two educational systems. ICSS system is well-maintained for Chinese education in this regard. For ICSS Chinese students, the Chinese language is indeed the basic medium to converse and connect with others, also the language to acquire knowledge.

NSS Chinese students, on the contrary, are hardly exposed to the use of Chinese language in the school domains. These students may perhaps communicate

**Table 4.** *ICSS and NSS Chinese Students' Perspectives on Chinese Language Factors at Micro Level*

| Dependent Variable | ICSS (N=448) | NSS (N=442) | *t*-test for Equality of Means | | | Cohen's *d* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M (SD)* | *M (SD)* | *t* | *df* | Sig. (2-tailed) | |
| CLUD | 4.19 (0.54) | 3.98 (0.55) | 5.777 | 888 | .000* | .39 |
| CLStudy | 4.41 (0.69) | 2.54 (1.11) | 30.214 | 739.702 | .000* | 2.02 |
| CLLeisure | 4.07 (0.72) | 4.02 (0.70) | 1.063 | 888 | .288 | - |
| CLPro | 3.56 (0.73) | 3.47 (0.61) | 2.069 | 862.105 | .039* | .13 |
| CLPre | 4.27 (0.71) | 4.26 (0.67) | .242 | 888 | .809 | - |

*\*p<.05. CLUD: Chinese language usage in daily domains, CLStudy: Chinese language as study language, CLLeisure: Chinese language as leisure language, CLPro: Chinese language proficiency and CLPre: Chinese language preference in ethnic-based cultural activities.*

in Chinese among themselves because they have a Chinese primary school educational background but certainly not with peers of other ethnicities. Since the Malay language is the medium of instruction at schools, the official and standard communication is in the Malay language even with non-Malay teachers. The need to adapt and shift to the usage of Malay language is immediate and habitual. The Chinese language is not a study language for them. Therefore, it is understandable that they considered their Chinese language proficiency lower than those in ICSS.

Apart from that, both ICSS and NSS Chinese students show a similar trend in Chinese language usage when they are given freedom. In doing leisure activities such as using social networks, reading books, listening songs, and so on, as well as ethnic-based cultural activities such as learning about Confucianism, celebrating Chinese festivals, and so on, both groups of students prefer to use the Chinese language most of the time. Despite studying in Malay-medium schools, NSS Chinese students attach to the Chinese language in their private domains of life. Regardless of educational systems, the Chinese language is still a preference in activities related to their heritage, culture, and ethnicity.

### Chinese Students' Perspectives on Chinese Language Factors at Macro Level

As shown in Table 5, a statistically significant difference is found in the analysis of the independent sample t-test for both the Chinese language factors at a macro level. With equal variances assumed, the study showed statistically lower score for ICSS students $(4.04 \pm 0.61)$ than NSS students $(4.17 \pm 0.57)$ in ICLL, $t(888) = -3.116$, $p = .002$. Similarly, ICSS students $(3.85 \pm 0.62)$ also showed statistically lower score than NSS students $(3.99 \pm 0.62)$ in CCMTE, $t(888) = -3.344$, $p = .001$. Both factors had a small effect size.

Chinese students from both types of educational contexts demonstrated positive attitudes towards the importance of Chinese language and the maintenance of comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education, but NSS students indicated a stronger will. The importance of the Chinese language is indicated in terms of the practicability of the maintenance of Chinese culture and the persistence of Chinese Malaysians' identity. In the same vein, NSS Chinese students also had a higher appreciation and acknowledgment of the comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education in Malaysia. They perceived Chinese education as the choice for all Chinese Malaysians not just at the primary school level but should continue until secondary school. This is perhaps the reason that they are so determined in the Chinese language class even though under a discouraging learning environment. They would also follow the footsteps of their forefathers to protect Chinese education.

### Predictors to Chinese Identity

Using the enter mode of analysis, multiple regression is conducted to find out the significant predictors of Chinese identity. Table 6 shows the results of the regression predicting Chinese identity for ICSS students. These predictors together accounted for 24.3% of the total variance of ICSS students' Chinese identity, $F(7,440) = 21.494$, $p<.05$. Only two Chinese language factors at the macro level are statistically significantly predicted ICSS students' Chinese identity, ICLL being the stronger predictor, Beta = .305 and CCMTE, Beta = .251. None of the micro Chinese language factors predicted ICSS students' Chinese identity.

For ICSS Chinese students, the construction of Chinese identity took place in a conducive Chinese language learning environment. Everything in relation to the Chinese language is the norm, usual, and as it should be by rights in the school. Chinese identity is not a salient identification within the school context because the concept of Chinese ingroup togetherness

**Table 5.** *ICSS and NSS Chinese Students' Perspectives on Chinese Language Factors at Macro Level*

| Dependent Variable | ICSS (N=448) | NSS (N=442) | *t*-test for Equality of Means | | | Cohen's *d* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M (SD)* | *M (SD)* | *t* | *df* | Sig. (2-tailed) | |
| ICLL | 4.04 (0.61) | 4.17 (0.57) | -3.116 | 888 | .002* | .22 |
| CCMTE | 3.85 (0.62) | 3.99 (0.62) | -3.344 | 888 | .001* | .23 |

*\*p<.05. ICLL: the importance of Chinese language in life and CCMTE: comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education.*

**Table 6.** *Regression Predicting Chinese Identity for ICSS Students (N=448)*

| Predicting Variable | Beta | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|
| CLUD | -.001 | -.020 | .984 |
| CLStudy | -.037 | -.756 | .450 |
| CLLeisure | -.026 | -.488 | .626 |
| CLPro | .031 | .709 | .479 |
| CLPre | .021 | .433 | .665 |
| ICLL | .305 | 5.770 | .000* |
| CCMTE | .251 | 4.862 | .000* |
| Statistics summary: $R^2$ = .255, Adjusted $R^2$ = .243, $F$ (7, 440) = 21.494 | | | |

*Dependent variable: Chinese identity, *p<.05. CLUD: Chinese language usage in daily domains, CLStudy: Chinese language as study language, CLLeisure: Chinese language as leisure language, CLPro: Chinese language proficiency and CLPre: Chinese language preference in ethnic-based cultural activities, ICLL: the importance of Chinese language in life and CCMTE: comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education.*

**Table 7.** *Regression Predicting Chinese Identity for NSS Students (N=442)*

| Predicting Variable | Beta | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|
| CLUD | .042 | .819 | .413 |
| CLStudy | -.092 | -2.017 | .044* |
| CLLeisure | .151 | 2.929 | .004* |
| CLPro | .102 | 2.283 | .023* |
| CLPre | .037 | .795 | .427 |
| ICLL | .087 | 1.525 | .128 |
| CCMTE | .312 | 5.482 | .000* |
| Statistics summary: $R^2$ = .239, Adjusted $R^2$ = .227, $F$ (7, 434) = 19.484 | | | |

*Dependent variable: Chinese identity, *p<.05. CLUD: Chinese language usage in daily domains, CLStudy: Chinese language as study language, CLLeisure: Chinese language as leisure language, CLPro: Chinese language proficiency and CLPre: Chinese language preference in ethnic-based cultural activities, ICLL: the importance of Chinese language in life and CCMTE: comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education.*

is not relevant among the students. The learning and communicating in Chinese is normal in the sense that they rarely encounter circumstances where they need to use other languages except during Malay and English classes. Chinese identity in this context is not predicted by the micro level but the macro level Chinese language factors.

Students' perspectives on the importance of Chinese language in life and comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education, being a minority in a larger context of society level, predicted their Chinese identity. They understand the importance of the Chinese language for their future, and in keeping Chinese culture and identity. Also, they are willing to participate in

conserving what has been done so far for Chinese education in Malaysia. In fact, ICSS education system ensure the perpetuation of the Chinese language. The role of ICSS to inculcate a sense of Chinese awareness, maintain Chinese characteristics, and passionate about culture dissemination is generally agreed (Chen, 2011). Chinese identity, in this case, is constructed in the students' understanding of the role of mother tongue and the significance of keeping it in a multi-ethnic society.

Table 7 revealed that the regression predicting Chinese identity for NSS students. Of the total variance of NSS students' Chinese identity, 22.7% can be explained by Chinese language factors, *F*

(7,434) = 19.484, $p<.05$. Altogether, four Chinese language factors are found to be statistically significant predictors in NSS students' Chinese identity. There is only one, but the strongest, predictor at the macro level, CCMTE, Beta=.312. Three other micro Chinese language factors are found to predict Chinese identity. From the stronger to the weaker in strength, the significant predictors are CLLeisure, Beta = .151, CLPro, Beta = .102, and CLStudy, Beta = -.092. In accordance to ICSS students, the strongest predictor to NSS students' Chinese identity is Chinese language factor at a macro level. However, unlike ICSS students, NSS students' Chinese identity is predicted by three micro Chinese language factors.

For NSS Chinese students, being a minority in school and for the very few who are consistent enough to attend a Chinese language class, being Chinese is meaningful. This is a different identity vis-a-vis Malay and other ethnic groups. Having been transitioned into a relatively heterogeneous from a homogenous setting in terms of ethnic composition, students who felt ethnicity is very important to them made use of intragroup contact for positive experiences (Douglass, Yip, & Shelton, 2014). Thus, being consistent in the Chinese language class implied an ingroup togetherness which in turn constructed their identity. Having a limited time for Chinese language class, the students seized every opportunity to learn their mother tongue. As a result, NSS Chinese students would affirm, think, and rethink and make sense with their Chinese identity.

Chinese language as leisure language and Chinese language proficiency positively predicted Chinese identity of NSS Chinese students. When the students used the Chinese language more frequently in their leisure activities and when they are more competent and confident with the Chinese language, they identified more with Chinese identity. However, Chinese language as a student subject went the opposite direction in which it predicted Chinese identity negatively. In NSS context, the less frequent the Chinese language is used in an academic study, the more the students identified with Chinese identity. These students persist in attending the Chinese language class as an elective language. When all academic subjects are studied in Malay, the Chinese language is at risk and marginalized and, thus, they felt the need to identify with their Chinese identity. In other words, Chinese identity is constructed in a

process when they are required to study not in Chinese language but other languages, Malay language in the case of NSS.

The overall Malay as a medium of instruction school environment left little room for Chinese language learning. Therefore, NSS Chinese students recognized the necessity to ensure that Chinese education persists in the long run. Students' positive views on comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education predicted Chinese identity. The stronger pride and courage to maintain the Chinese education contributed to stronger Chinese identity. In this regard, NSS Chinese students are in concert with those from ICSS that indeed Chinese education is impactful to symbolize Chinese identity in Malaysia.

### Chinese Students' Perspectives on the Importance of Learning Chinese Language

The respondents are required to answer an open-ended question as a supplement to the analysis of multiple-choice questions. Their answers spanned from the significance of individuals, family, and ethnic group. Their views also connected the past and the future meaningfully in regard to the learning of the Chinese language. Table 8 showed two main themes which have emerged from the analysis.

The first theme grouped the Chinese students' opinions regarding the perseverance of the glorious past. Their views are built positively on the meaning, interpretation, and significance of learning the Chinese language. ICSS and NSS Chinese students indicated similar perspectives on six sub-themes. This is comprehensible where ethnicity is a salient identification of social groupings in a Malaysian context. When an ethnic group is the minority in context, members would report higher ingroup favoritism and make use of their heritage and cultural maintenance as instruments of ingroup recognition (Verkuyten & de Wolf, 2002; Gu & Patkin, 2013). In this case, Chinese students who saw Chinese Malaysians as an ethnic minority group, on the whole, had consistent views, regardless of their educational background. They had a strong sense of connectedness to the Chinese language out of the perception of who they are.

For these two groups of students, learning Chinese language is important because it is their mother tongue; it is their root and origin; it maintains their Chinese

**Table 8.** *ICSS and NSS Chinese Students' Perspectives on the Importance of Learning Chinese Language*

| ICSS | NSS | ICSS | NSS |
|---|---|---|---|
| Perseverance of the past | | Anticipation for the future | |
| Mother tongue | | International language | |
| Root and origin | | Better and more effective communication | |
| The responsibility as a Chinese | | The best way of expressing thoughts and feelings | |
| Chinese culture, customs and traditions | | Future career | |
| Chinese history, wisdom and philosophy | | Application of university abroad | Ethnic identification as Chinese Malaysian |
| Heritage | | The rise of China | - |
| Pride | - | Protect and pass on Chinese education | - |

culture, customs, and traditions; it opens up a window to the knowledge of Chinese history, wisdom, and philosophy; and it is a heritage from their ancestors. The analysis of ICSS Chinese students' responses offered an extra opinion, in which the students are proud of being Chinese and able to understand the Chinese language.

The following examples showed some of the excerpts written by the respondents under the theme of perseverance of the past.

> *If we do not know our own mother tongue, people will regard us as "bananas."* (ICSS/ mother tongue)

> *Learning Chinese language reminds me as a Chinese.* (ICSS/root and origin)

> *Learning Chinese language is important. I have been talking in Chinese language all my life, this a responsibility being a Chinese.* (NSS/the responsibility as a Chinese)

> *Learning Chinese language enhances my knowledge of Chinese values and history.* (NSS/Chinese history, wisdom and philosophy)

The second theme provided the future lens of learning the Chinese language. Both groups of ICSS and NSS Chinese students indicated four themes in the same voice. The Chinese language is their mother tongue inherited from the past, but concurrently it is an international language. In addition, they considered the Chinese language as a language that leads to better and more effective communication; the Chinese language

is the best way of expressing thoughts and feelings and useful for future career.

More variation is found in learning the Chinese language on the anticipation for the future between ICSS and NSS Chinese students. In an education system where its examination qualification excluded them from the local public universities, ICSS Chinese students saw the usefulness of Chinese language for application of university abroad, especially Taiwan and China. This group of students recognized the importance of the Chinese language in the continuity of Chinese education. They are determined to protect the system of Chinese education and pass it on to future generations. Furthermore, they believed that by learning the Chinese language, they are prepared for the rise of China with the subsequent opportunities in commercial trade, business, and career.

In accordance with the quantitative analysis, NSS Chinese students thought that learning the Chinese language is important for the ethnic identification. Again, in their multi-ethnic learning context, the Chinese language set the ethnic boundary of Chinese against others.

The following examples are some of the excerpts written by the respondents under the theme of anticipation for the future.

> *Learning Chinese can connect Chinese people worldwide and make communication easier.* (ICSS/better and more effective communication)

> *Chinese language is becoming an international language, and with the rise of China, we have*

*an advantage in our future career because China's market is large.* (ICSS/international language/the rise of China/future career)

*Malay language cannot express my feelings clearly, only Chinese language can express my feelings. Chinese songs can touch my heart.* (NSS/the best way of expressing thoughts and feelings)

*Learning Chinese enhances my chance to apply university in Taiwan and China.* (ICSS/ application of university abroad)

*Chinese language can protect the status of Chinese ethnic group in Malaysia. Chinese language is a gift inherited from our forefathers through much efforts, if we do not keep it, then perhaps we can no longer speak Chinese language in public.* (NSS/ethnic identification as Chinese Malaysian)

## Conclusion

This study indicated a significant comparison between two educational systems which are structurally and practically different in ethnic composition of the students and teaching staffs, curriculum implementation, the language of pedagogical instruction, and most importantly, the extent of the teaching and learning of the Chinese language. With an identical Chinese primary educational background, Chinese identity is constructed to a different extent between NSS and ICSS Chinese students through a different process of education interaction at the secondary school level. Specifically, Chinese identity is formed, negotiated, and maintained through the different degree of learning; using and understanding the Chinese language in their respective educational contexts.

For NSS Chinese students in a disadvantaged Chinese language learning environment, they identified their Chinese identity with a comprehensive Chinese mother tongue education in the country. The learning of the Chinese language represents their identity and safeguards the interests of Chinese ethnic group. In addition, being distinctively Chinese in predominantly Malay schools, the Chinese language factors in the means of study, leisure, and proficiency by way of immediate interaction contributed to the Chinese identity. In comparison, for the ICSS Chinese students who receive Chinese education even at the secondary school level, their Chinese identity is determined largely by their knowledge and comprehension in the significance of maintaining Chinese language and education at the societal level.

Notwithstanding, Chinese Malaysians would hold on to Chinese identity as their ethnic identification in the years to come. The Chinese language indeed is a crucial aspect to create and keep alive in-group togetherness of the Chinese ethnic group. Chinese identity is maintained and consolidated through the learning of Chinese language, as well as Chinese education, even more under the Chinese language learning restriction context. Having been educated and literate in Chinese language, the subjective sense of "Chineseness" is positively nurtured in the process of acquiring, interpreting, and appreciating the language. Therefore, it is of utmost importance, as indicated by the students themselves, that they need to protect the Chinese language and education and pass it to the generations to come.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE:

This study was approved by the institution.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

None.

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