

# CHINESE LANGUAGE AS AN IDENTITY VIEWED BY THE YOUNGER CHINESE ETHNICS IN INDONESIA

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## ABSTRACT

The political environment of Indonesia's New Order regime and the reformation period has brought various views among Chinese community in Indonesia on how use Chinese language. The aim of the study is to examine the importance of using Chinese language as an identity among Chinese community in Indonesia as perceived by the younger generation of the community. This study uses both quantitative and qualitative research method. The findings reveal that there are ethnic Chinese respondents who are not able to speak Chinese, conceive Chinese language not as an ethnic Chinese identity. However, the results show that not all respondents that are able to speak Chinese agree that Chinese language to be viewed as an ethnic Chinese identity.

**Key words:** Ethnic Chinese, Identity, Chinese language

## INTRODUCTION

Not all Chinese community in Indonesia who born between 1967 and 1998 are able to speak Chinese. One of the reason is caused by the issuance of Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967, which prohibited celebration of all form of Chinese traditional culture, to communicate in Chinese and also the using Chinese character (Dawis, 2010:28). When Abdurrahman Wahid became president in 1999, he issued a Presidential Decree No. 6 in 2000. This statement repealed the Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967. Since then, Chinese culture after being harshly banned, became back to life (Yuniarti, 2011:18), and Indonesian ethnic Chinese born after 2000 gained the freedom to learn and communicate in Chinese language.

These two different political policies resulted in two kinds of ethnic Chinese Indonesian youth. The first group is the younger generation of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese which their parents are able to speak Chinese and they have passed the language down to them or they have let a tutor to teach the language to their children. The second group is the younger generation of ethnic Chinese Indonesian whom their parents do not pass the language down despite the fact that their parents are able to speak Chinese. Their parents have given their children a freedom to choose to learn the language. Therefore, it is questioned whether younger Chinese generations today view Chinese language as an ethnic Chinese identity. This phenomenon serves as a reason behind the study as well as provides further research opportunities.

Ethnic Chinese can be known whether they are able to speak Chinese when traced from their age. Those who were born in the time of the new order in 1966 and after the reform era in 1998 are currently about 15-47 years old. This group should not be able to speak Chinese because of the Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967. However, in reality, there are parents of this group who secretly taught Chinese language to their children. Because of that, there are two phenomena created. The first phenomenon is the Chinese

people aged between 15 to 47 years who can speak Chinese. The second phenomenon is the Chinese people aged between 15 years-47 years who are not able to speak Chinese. The research concentrated on ethnic Chinese respondents at the aged 20-25 years because the difference between the two groups – first who are able to speak Chinese and those who are not able - has first appeared on this age.

## **STUDIES OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **1. Identity**

According Bloom (1990), we can distinguish two definitions of identity; the national identity, and the social identity. National identity in this study refers to the depiction of sense in which a mass of people has made the same identity based on national symbols - symbols that become part of a country. Social identity is a collection of understanding where those people involved attach these symbols meaning on themselves, and in the meantime using another person's perspective as a social object (p. 52).

According to Barker (2000), self-identity is a concept that we use to express ourselves about the subject. While social identity is our identity formation derived from the expectations and opinions of others. So investigate the identity of a person is to investigate how we see ourselves and how others see us (p. 217-219). Giddens (1991:53) says that identity associated with a person's biography, therefore, identity is an ever processing event. Longhurst, Smith, Bagnall, Crawford, & Ogborn (2008) argue that people can express identity of who they really are, to explain the self-awareness found in modern individuals. Identity is the nature of the person's appearance, not based on the essential features, but rather on the appearance based on an expectation of the culture (p. 142).

### **2. Language as an Identity**

According Barker (2000), regarding the relationship of identity to language, he argues that language does not refer to the subject matter of a person by words, but that language is a way of regular speaking of a person. So the language does not directly represent the "I" that has been present beforehand. Language does not express its "true identity" who has been there, but it makes itself into existence (p. 227-229).

### **3. Multicultural Society**

Multiculturalism is a common view that give a diversity of race able to live peacefully in a pluralistic society. In a multicultural society, Sadar and Van Loon (2005) suggested that only race is considered when discussing identity. In this framework of plurality, identity is seen as a result of customs, practices, meanings, lasting legacies, specific personalities, and mutual experiences (p. 122-123).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This article examines the identity of someone and it cannot be separated from one's culture, so descriptive qualitative research is used. As described by Sudikan (2001:85) , culture tend to be an ethnographic research involving holistic analysis, and the researcher acted as a research instrument in collecting and interpreting the data. The researcher interacts with the informants to explore in depth informations. Meanwhile, to support far reaching data acquisition, questionnaires are widely used as a characteristic of quantitative research . This

article uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative research. When qualitative research is conducted by questionnaires distribution, a quantitative research can be used in conjunction to it, while using the qualitative context as the main focus (Moleong, 2002: 22).

Data resources or respondents who can provide information about everything regarding identity are purposive selected, namely the Petra Christian university students. Why? Because apart from their age between 18 to 25 years, Petra Christian University students are also mostly of Chinese descent, while they varied in ability to speak Chinese or not. This will benefit the study because it can provide information about the pluralistic identity. To capture in depth information, 50 students were selected, while gender was not considered.

Data collection techniques applied by distributing questionnaire to all faculties at Petra Christian University. The reason using questionnaires is the large number of respondents and that the researchers know for sure about the variable to be measured. Questionnaires are a good way to collect data when researchers already know the variables to be measured and what to expect from the respondents, was also noted by Sugiono (2007: 199). The next step is sorting and grouping the questionnaires. To complement the data, another interview was needed to 10 of the original respondents living in Java island and 10 respondents outside Java island.

## FINDINGS

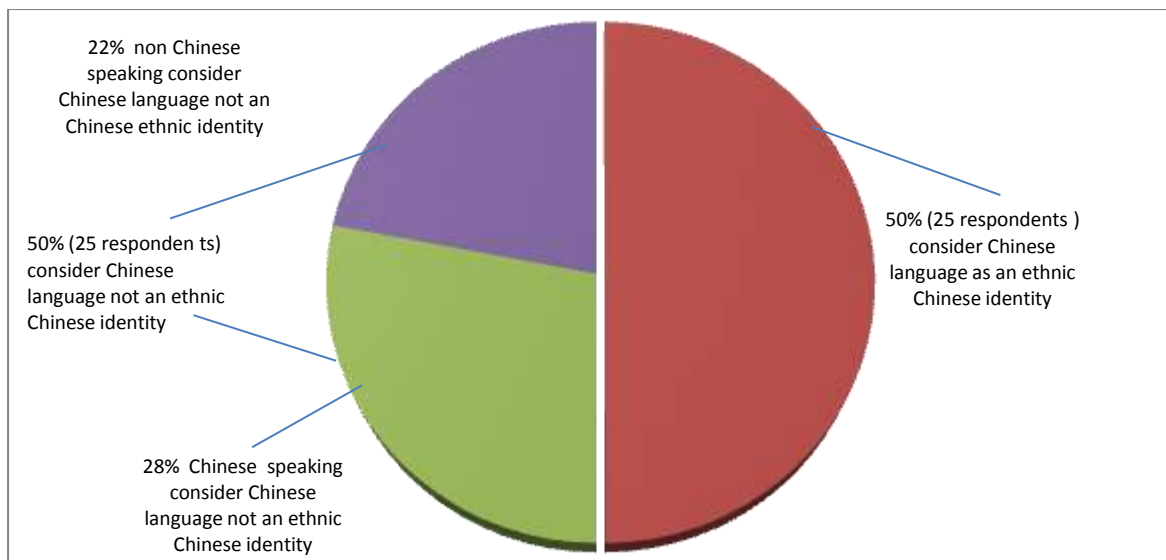
Spread sheet of 50 questionnaires collected back according ability of Chinese-speaking respondents, were put in a table no. 1 detailing identity as follows.

**Table No. 1** Chinese language as an Identity of Chinese Etnics depending their ability of speaking Chinese

Respondent	Country Region Island of Indonesia	Parents ability of speaking Chinese		Individual respondent ability to speak Chinese	Communicating in Chinese at home	Chinese language as a self Identity
		Father	Mother			
1 (F)	Jawa	+	+	+	+	+
2 (F)	Jawa	-	+	+	+	+
3 (F)	Jawa	-	+	+	-	+
4 (F)	Jawa	-	+	+	-	-
5 (F)	Jawa	+	+	+	+	+
6 (F)	Jawa	+	-	+	+	+
7 (F)	Jawa	-	-	-	-	-
8 (F)	Jawa	+	+	+	+	+
9 (M)	Jawa	+	+	+	-	-
10 (F)	Jawa	+	+	+	+	+
11 (F)	Jawa	-	+	+	-	+
12 (F)	Jawa	+	-	+	-	-
13 (M)	Jawa	+	+	+	-	+
14 (M)	Jawa	-	-	+	-	+
15 (F)	Jawa	+	+	+	+	+
16 (F)	Jawa	+	-	+	-	-
17 (M)	Jawa	-	+	-	-	-
18 (M)	Jawa	+	-	-	-	-
19 (M)	Jawa	+	+	+	-	-
20 (F)	Jawa	+	+	+	+	+
21 (M)	Jawa	+	-	+	-	-

22 (F)	Jawa	-	-	+	-	+
23 (F)	Jawa	-	+	+	+	+
24 (F)	Jawa	+	+	+	+	+
25 (F)	Jawa	+	+	+	+	+
26 (F)	Jawa	-	+	+	+	-
27 (F)	Jawa	-	+	+	-	+
28 (F)	Jawa	+	+	-	-	-
29 (F)	Jawa	-	-	+	-	-
30 (F)	Jawa	-	-	+	-	-
31 (M)	Jawa	+	-	+	+	-
32 (M)	Jawa	-	-	-	-	-
33 (M)	Jawa	+	+	-	-	-
34 (M)	Jawa	-	-	-	-	-
35 (F)	Jawa	+	-	+	-	+
36 (F)	Jawa	-	-	+	-	-
37 (M)	Jawa	-	-	-	-	-
38 (F)	Sumatera	+	+	+	+	-
39 (M)	Kalimantan	-	-	+	-	-
40 (F)	Kalimantan	-	+	-	-	-
41 (M)	Palu	+	+	-	-	-
42 (M)	Lombok	-	-	+	-	-
43 (F)	Kalimantan	+	-	+	-	+
44 (F)	Kalimantan	+	-	-	-	-
45 (F)	Lombok	+	-	+	-	+
46 (M)	Kalimantan	+	+	+	+	+
47 (F)	Kalimantan	+	+	+	+	+
48 (M)	Kalimantan	+	+	+	+	+
49 (M)	Kalimantan	+	+	+	+	+
50 (M)	Kalimantan	+	+	+	+	+

From Table details of the 50 respondents show that there were 25 respondents (50%) who believe the Chinese language as Chinese ethnic identity, and 25 respondents (50%) believe the Chinese language is not a Chinese ethnic identity. When analyzed in terms of region, respondents number 1 to number 37 were born in Java (37 respondents); respondent number 38 to number 50 were born outside the island of Java, namely the island of Kalimantan, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Lombok (13 respondents). From the region category in Indonesia, it was found that both respondents originated from the island of Java, and outside the island of Java, when the respondent personally can not speak Chinese they all felt sure that Chinese language is not a Chinese ethnic identity. This phenomenon indicates that someone's mother language is no longer a self-identity. Table contents are visualized in the following Graph no. 1.



**Graph No. 1** Percentage of Respondents who consider Chinese language as an Ethnic Chinese identity or not depending their ability to speak Chinese.

In general, 50% of respondents who speak Chinese consider Chinese language as an ethnic identity, while remaining 50% of the respondents (who speak and do not speak Chinese) consider Chinese language not an ethnic identity.

Respondents able to speak Chinese are distinguished the following categories:

1. a) 64 % (16 respondents) communicate in Chinese at home, and 36 % ( 9 respondents) do not communicate in Chinese at home.
  - b) Further analysis turns out that when their parents can speak Chinese, respondents at home certainly communicate in Chinese. An interesting fact is that one respondent even though he and his parents were able to speak Chinese, but at home do not communicate in Chinese, and still believes the Chinese language as an ethnic identity.
2. a) From the other 50% of respondents who believed the Chinese language not as an ethnic identity, 14 respondents (28%) who can speak Chinese and 11 respondents (22%) who could not speak Chinese. Respondents who could not speak the Chinese, at home certainly do not communicate in Chinese and therefore they do not consider Chinese language as an ethnic identity.
  - b) What is interesting here is found respondents could not speak Chinese, but both parents can speak Chinese, and at home does not communicate in Chinese, and they consider the Chinese language not as an Chinese ethnic identity.

From the description, it can be concluded from the results that when respondents definitely not able to speak Chinese, they certainly consider that Chinese language is not a Chinese ethnic identity. When the respondents were able to speak Chinese and think the Chinese language as an ethnic identity, they do not certainly communicate in Chinese language at home. Respondents who can speak Chinese but does not communicate with the Chinese language in the home are caused by their father or their mother could not speak Chinese. An interesting thing was found that in a family were although either the respondent or both of their parents are able to speak Chinese but communicate in Indonesian, Chinese language is considered not an ethnic identity.

## DISCUSSION

Respondents who are not able to speak Chinese and consider Chinese language as not an ethnic Chinese identity, because even when they do not communicate in Chinese with non-Chinese citizens, they can still be recognized as ethnic Chinese. Non Chinese citizens are still able to recognize ethnic Chinese from skin color; manner of dress; slanted shape eyes. Therefore, the respondents feel that language is not an ethnic Chinese identity.

Respondents who are able to speak Chinese but believe that Chinese language is not a Chinese ethnic identity, because there are other identities that may indicate a person's identity, the language accent already indicates a person's identity. While the respondents who are able to speak Chinese and consider that Chinese language is an ethnic identity, because in their opinion Chinese people should be able to speak Chinese, and if they don't, they are not ethnic Chinese.

### 1. Analysis in Connection to Identity Meaning

Chinese language is considered an ethnic identity if it is related to the notion of national identity according to Bloom (1990), but it turns out that Chinese language is considered by the majority of respondents not a Chinese ethnic identity. These ethnic Chinese research groups consider Chinese language not a national identity but it can be an utterance accent, skin color, manner of dress. Associated with social identity, for those who say that Chinese language is not Chinese ethnic identity, because they feel the meaning of national symbols no longer affixed to them, but they use another person's perspective as a social object to consider ethnic Chinese,. For them, Chinese language is no attribute for identifying them as a Chinese ethnic because they already feel part of the social community. This group of respondents felt though not using the Chinese language to communicate or not able to speak Chinese, other people can still recognize them as Chinese descendants from other symbols .

Associated with the theory of the identity of Baker (2000), for respondents who still believes the Chinese language as a means of ethnic Chinese identity, they consider themselves as Indonesian citizens of an ethnic Chinese descent. They do not want to remove the identity of their ancestors. Regarding the views of others towards them, they still expect someone else thinks them as Chinese descendants.

The existence of some respondents who felt the Chinese language is not as if the Chinese ethnic identity is associated with the theory of Giddens ( 1991:53 ), it was indeed a proceeding identity so that there exists respondents who believe the Chinese language as Chinese ethnic identity and also who think not as ethnic Chinese identity. The phenomenon of the Chinese language argued as ethnic identity or not is also consistent with the theory stated by Longhurst, Bagnall, Crawford & Ogborn, (2008), that self-identity is not based on essential characteristics, but rather from the appearance based on a culture expectation. The respondents expect the Chinese language is not essential, but considers that Chinese culture represent their identity, for example, celebrating traditional Chinese festivals. These respondents were not able to speak Chinese ,and feel that from their culture can be recognized as ethnic Chinese, like from their utterance accent, their dressing, their social intercourse and so on .

### 2. Language as an Identity

Respondents of Chinese descent despite not speaking the Chinese language, but to Indonesian they are still recognized as a Chinese ethnic. This is in accordance with what was

argued by Barker (2000) that the language does not refer to the subject matter of a person by words, but the language is a way of regular talking about the person. So the language does not directly represent the "I" that has been present beforehand. Language does not express its "true identity" as if it has been there, but makes itself into existence (p. 227-229). From the accent and the way someone talks, we are already aware of the person's identity, not necessarily from the language.

### **3. Analisis in Accordance with Multicultural Society**

Known to the state of Indonesia consists of many ethnic groups, giving existence of many cultures. Therefore it can be said that the Indonesian society is a multicultural society. The findings show that there are respondents who think the Chinese language as an identity and there is not, this is in accordance with the statement of Sardar, Ziauddin and Van Loon (2005), that when discussing identity in a multicultural society, race is more emphasized. The respondents considered other more important characteristics, such as how to dress, eyes with slanted shape, not the language.

### **4. Associated to the Political Development in Indonesia**

When the Chinese language as an identity of someone traced the political developments in Indonesia, it surely change. At the time of the old order of the reign of President Sukarno , Indonesia's relationship with China very closely. Plus then there are special schools for Chinese nationals living in Indonesia using Chinese language as an intermediate language and all subjects being taught Chinese language. The current political situation led to two Chinese ethnic groups. The first Chinese ethnic groups are ethnic Chinese called " baba" who can not speak and has embrace Indonesian citizens. Ethnic Chinese "baba" are the public or private schools that use the Indonesian language as an intermediary in all subjects. Other Chinese ethnic groups are ethnic Chinese are still Chinese citizens but are married in Indonesia and educate their children in Chinese schools. This phenomenon results in two Chinese ethnic groups, some consider Chinese language is important as an ethnic identity, others do not.

Regarding the phenomenon of younger ethnic Chinese Indonesian not learning Chinese language has been written by Handoko (2009), who said that the younger generation of ethnic Chinese Indonesian have experienced socio-cultural changes resulting in language usage trends. Although young people are of Chinese descent but are influenced by the more common usage of English among young people, resulting in a shift in their perceptions of ethnicity (p. 191). So findings of Handoko (2009) support this article.

When political current change at the time of the new order that is the reign of President Suharto strictly prohibits all forms of Chinese culture, including the use of Chinese language in the community. This phenomenon also raises two Chinese ethnic groups of Indonesia. First their conscience against all forms of coercion, they want to maintain regular Chinese language as ethnic identity. While there are also ethnic Chinese who sincerely follow government regulations and want to melt away as Indonesia.

Political situation of reform by President Abdul Rahman Wahid, who frees all forms of Chinese culture, including the use of Chinese language. While such a situation poses a phenomenon for the younger generation to choose, but they prefer not to use Chinese language because they feel as a part of the Indonesian nation by using the Indonesian language.

## CONCLUSION

Sociological surveys are mostly perception based and we have arrived at some of the findings of the surveys, which will open up new avenues of discussion on the changing role of the language in deciding the ethnic identity of the person. We find that respondents who could not speak Chinese all found the Chinese language as ethnic identity, those who did not speak Chinese, think that the Chinese language is not a Chinese ethnic identity. This proves that the Chinese language as it always proceeds identity and depend on the political situation of a country. Chinese language as one's identity depends on the political situation in the country, such as in Indonesia because of the political policies aimed at different ethnic resulted in ethnic Chinese Indonesian young generation has two different views. There is a younger generation of ethnic Chinese Indonesian Chinese language which was important to show his identity as ethnic Chinese. There is also a younger generation of Indonesian ethnic Chinese who speak Indonesian feel even though he was still recognizable as ethnic Chinese and is part of the unity of the Indonesian people, this group of respondents still feel comfortable though not able to speak Chinese. This phenomenon represents a healthy democratic political situation in Indonesia, all citizens have the right to determine their rights as citizens and reform go as expected. It is important to note that the role of policies in modifying the natural and democratic rights of persons have long term influence on the socio-cultural character.

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