



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

“It’s about loving Chinese”:
Exploring the impact of language on
Chinese students’ sense of national identity

LSE GROUPS Research

Group 7

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Abstract

Based on existing literature, the role of language appears to be significant in fostering one's sense of national identity. This study seeks to apply theories of how language impacts national identity to the case of China, where experiences of language are contingent on the political, ideological and historical contexts. This research employs a constructivist approach, involving in-depth interviews with eight Chinese overseas undergraduates. The interviews exposed common themes in the students' experiences of language and national identity, identifying patterns through thematic analysis. They were then interpreted in the light of literature research, acknowledging the symptoms of the Chinese political, ideological and historical context in the students' personal experiences. The results brought up three main themes. Nearly all interviewees expressed support for the standardisation of language in China, and suggested it is an important tool for cultural unification. Nevertheless, English was presented as a pragmatic means of communication rather than something that detracts from one's sense of national identity. However, the interviewees also recognised the insufficiency of language alone to foster one's sense of national identity. While this research focuses on a small qualitative sample, the findings are applicable to other countries attempting to standardise local dialects with the aim to increase cultural unification and foster national identity.

Key words: language, national identity, Mandarin, dialects, unification

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1. Introduction

Against the background of President Xi Jinping's *Chinese Dream* vision lies a resurgence in patriotic nationalism in China. Indeed, Xi declared his determination in the 19th Communist Party Congress last year that China shall '*take centre stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind*' (Phillips, 2017) thereby realising the so-called *Chinese Dream* by 2050. Although China's engagement with globalisation since its economic reform in 1978 has been conducive to its '*social diversification and restratification*' (Juffermans and Wang, 2015, pp. 321), a by-product ensuing from this engagement is, according to Zhu and Yang (2004), '*English as a new form of opium*' for the Chinese. A proficiency in English is '*a global literacy skill*' (Tsui and Tollefson, 2006). English therefore plays the role of '*homogenising local cultures and languages in the new world order of globalisation*' (Tam and Weiss, 2004). Rather than being the *de facto lingua franca* of international communication though, Philippson argues that there are grounds for referring to English as a '*lingua frankensteinia*' (1993) if there is an asymmetry in the intercultural communication. It is worth recalling that Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's novel is the person *who created the monster* as opposed to the monster itself. As acknowledged by Xi himself during his speech at Guanghua Studio, '*whether you like it or not, the global economy is the big ocean that you cannot escape from*' (2017). The inevitability of globalisation implies that *Chinese Dream* can only be realised at the expense of risking the inevitability of English as a '*lingua frankensteinia*' unless the Chinese culture is well-preserved.

A means of such preservation is to foster one's sense of national identity. In 1956, Mao Zedong launched a language policy where all dialects in China shall henceforth be standardised to Mandarin. Although Mandarin was first adopted as the national official language, it was later promoted vigorously in the late 20th Century *via* mechanisms including but not limited to '*laws, rules and regulations, language education policies, language tests, and language use in public spaces*' (Shohamy, 2005). In fact, a joint press conference on the current status of languages in China was held in 2017 whereby Ministry of Education and the State Language

Commission observed that further progress had been made in validation tests on the popularisation of Mandarin at county level. The very implementation and enforcement of such language policy suggest that language is *necessary* for fostering one's sense of national identity.

Nevertheless, recent research regarding the relationship between language and national identity has revealed that not all nation-states accord similar importance to language when fostering one's sense of national identity (Piller, 2001). Japan, for instance, privilege ethnicity and heritage: as a result, '*Japan-born Koreans who speak Japanese natively and who had never resided outside of Japan are still not eligible for Japanese citizenship*' (Pavlenko, 2002, pp. 170). This therefore adds another layer of complexity to the concept of national identity, posing the question as to whether or not language is a *necessary and sufficient* condition for fostering one's sense of national identity. As such, the research title of this paper is as follows – '*It's about loving Chinese*': Exploring the impact of language on Chinese students' sense of national identity. This research employs a constructivist approach where in-depth interviews with eight Chinese overseas undergraduates were conducted. Interviews were then interpreted *via* thematic analysis. Although a small qualitative sample was focused, findings would remain applicable to other countries attempting to foster one's sense of national identity in the face of globalisation.

2. Literature Review

A review of existing literature reveals that language has been explored as an important element of national identity. Language and language policies have extensively been used as a political instrument to help foster nationalism, indicating that leaders recognise the impact of language on national identity. From a theoretical perspective, Hobsbawm (1996) argues that all languages have elements of political self-assertion because there is a natural tendency for states to complement political independence with linguistic separatism. This is reflected by case studies on various

regions. According to Kelley (2004), nation-building in Eastern Europe in the post-Cold War period involved states repressing minority languages in order to bolster a singular national language and identity. Slovakia had a Hungarian population of 10% and sought to suppress the Hungarian language in favour of Slovakian by, for example, forbidding the issuance of bilingual school certificates. Studies of French language policies show that the country has consistently promoted a centralised language over regional languages since the 1789 revolution (going so far as to use violence against minority language speakers), as the central idea to nation-building became '*one state, one nation, one language*' (Harguindéguy and Itçaina, 2011, pp. 438). A compelling study by the Pew Research Centre (2017) surveyed a range of countries on the basis of national identity, finding a wide agreement that speaking a national language is '*very important*'; this view was shared by 70% of both the Americans and Japanese.

However, China has not been fully explored as a case study for how language impacts national identity. Indeed, there is a significant amount of literature on language policies in China in terms of how they are tied to the Chinese political, ideological and historical context. Wang et al. (2016) explain the historical Confucian concept of harmony as an important basis for Chinese policies, noting that language policies are designed to promote harmony among the population. Hughes (2016) argues that after the Japanese invasion of Taiwan, China promoted Mandarin as the 'national language' of Taiwan in order to ward off the Japanese influence. Tollefson (1991) presents China's attitude towards the English language as balancing the need for the country to modernise and adapt to the globalised world with the potential infiltration of Western ideas.

As such, the literature exposes an intricate relationship between China's political, ideological and historical context and the use of language in the country. Yet, the existing research does not explicitly explore the *impact* of language on individuals' sense of national identity in China. The motivation for this study is to combine the existing ideas of how language influences national identity with the case of China, and the politics, ideology and history that is intrinsic to the country's language situation. It aims to fill the gap in research of whether and how Chinese national identity is tied to language. China is a compelling case study because of the way the

language policies and the substantive language situation are tightly wound up with the country's politics, ideology and history (as detailed in the literature). This context allows us to explore not only the importance of language for national identity, but the implications of issues including globalisation, minority groups, orientalism and imperialism on the relationship between language and national identity. Although this study focuses on a small qualitative sample, the findings could be applicable to countries with similar political and historical contexts, such as those attempting to standardise local dialects with the aim to increase cultural unification and foster national identity.

3. Methodology

This research employs a constructivist approach wherein eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews included a pre-decided order of questions with an application of the attitudes, beliefs and characteristics of interviewees to adapt to the flow of the interview. Such semi-structured interviews provided a clear set of instructions for interviewees and the inclusion of open-ended questions allowed the interviewers to gain insights into the personal experiences of the interviewees. Our interviewees are not academic experts and they could not provide purely objective information. As such, our findings are not generalisable. They nevertheless offered an in-depth understanding into the personal experiences and perceptions of the interviewees.

In order to obtain *informed* consents from the participants, an information pack was provided which participants were strongly advised to read prior to signing the consent form. The pack aimed to inform participants as to the purpose of the research: (i) the treatment of their contribution (ii) means to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of participants (iii) outlining the right of participants to withdraw at any time of the research. Further, pseudonyms were used when referring to the participants throughout this research to ensure the anonymity of the

participants. Note that pseudonyms rather than numbers were used so as to lay out the insights of the interviewees in the manner of a 'storyline'.

A pilot interview was conducted with Tom a day before the other interviews in order to refine the topic from '*Experience of language policies*' to '*Experience of local and foreign language policies*'. Subsequent interviews were then conducted with seven Chinese undergraduates who are currently studying in London (namely, Alice, Chris, Charlie, Luke, Lilian, Matthew and Victoria). The duration of the interviews ranged from twenty to thirty minutes. Due to the qualitative nature of the interviews, thematic analysis was used to code the information collected thereby identifying relevant recurring themes, as well as individual insights. Such analysis is however time-consuming. Hence, time constraints did not allow us to increase the sample size. Moreover, we acknowledge that there is some bias in our interview sample; we were restricted to a selection of Chinese international students, who are naturally more internationally-orientated than the average Chinese national, and may have a skewed sense of national identity. The students are also more privileged than the average Chinese, and have likely had access to more education, including language education. Hence, the inability to generalise the insights of the participants is amplified.

4. Analysis

4.1 Local dialects vs. standardised Mandarin

One of the recurring themes in the interviews is that standardisation of languages has been used as a political tool in fostering one's sense of national identity in the name of unifying China. Nearly all interviewees expressed favourable and supportive tone to the current language policy in China. It is worth mentioning that there are two facets to 'language policy'. *Local* language policy concerns Article 9 to 20 of the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Language* as promulgated by Order No. 37 of the President of the People's Republic of China on

31 October 2000. This policy can be summarised as follows: *'Putonghua and the standardised Chinese characters shall be used by State organs as the official language, except when otherwise provided for in laws'*. Foreign language policy, on the other hand, concerns the mandate as issued by the Ministry of Education in 2001 which stipulates that English must be taught in Chinese public schools beginning in Year 3, with the option of initiating English instruction as early as Year 1. In fact, some interviewees justified the previous historical pattern of language policy in China and the changing direction of language policy in current context.

'[China] is not peaceful compared to now so what the government has to stress is a sense of unification [during the mid 20th century]. In order to enhance people's sense of integration, what the government has to do is to let them speak in the same language. [But] right now, Chinese government has actually launched projects to protect and support the dialects.'

Luke

Luke, by using historical comparison, sees the standardisation of languages not as a threat to local dialects but rather as a means of unification. As Li Wei (2013) mentioned, the Chinese standardisation of language echoed a deep-rooted "linguistic ideology" of China, which was the belief that the Chinese people shared an ancient language which was in existence for thousands of years. Therefore, the imposition of mandarin seemed natural under such a rhetoric. Meanwhile, the language policy was hardly a simple "pro-mandarin, anti-dialect" structure, given that the Department of Culture of China was continuously trying to preserve the local operas and festivals (which could only be done in local dialects rather than standard mandarin) as important branches of the Chinese cultural heritages. Similarly, a Chinese official interpreted the history of China as a process of "peaceful unification into a same family," with Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan being praised national heroes. The preservation of local language and the recognition of prominent minority figures actually carried the government's intention to strengthen the universalist tradition (as discussed previously), though the outcome of certain policy was not optimistic in general (Leibold, 2016). The local dialects were, to some extent, part of, though not necessarily the most essential part of the universal Chinese civilisation, and they had to subside for more crucial demand of economic progress and

modernisation. What reflected from the interviews was in accord with Westad's observation (2012), with many Chinese witness the critics on the minority-policy as unfair, giving that the minorities benefited as much as the Han people from the economic transformation (Westad, 2012, pp. 451).

Since the "shared language" demonstrated in the "linguistic tradition" was not completely eliminated, but remained alive in the form of mandarin in certain scenario, the extinction of some regional language would not be a major loss guided by certain ideology.

'Without a mutually intelligible language, there will be no trade across the country.'

Matthew

Echoed by:

'Unification could be achieved through a better communication and fuel the modernisation of China.'

Luke

'Standardisation of various dialects to Putonghua is a 'cultural reference to the language itself, which i would argue is a necessary part of nation building.'

Charlie

Interestingly, the realistic concerns over economic gains surely fuelled the transformation of national identity among the minority groups, especially the youngsters. Wang-bae Kim (2010) noticed how ethnic Koreans in China inclined to their 'Chineseness' comparing to the elder generations, as they do not have significant language barriers to the majority Han people thanks to the spread of mandarin in the ethnic Korean community. Desire for advancement and the fear of being marginalised had driven them to participate in the nationwide trend to compete with their peers in the wave of marketization, rather than frequently examine their past. The external factors according to the transformation of the Chinese social structure were: the shift from agricultural lifestyle to wage labour; the loss of ethnic

predominance due to out-migration; enhanced independence and personal autonomy of young women and the decline of patriarchal system.

4.2 Impacts of English imposition

Another recurring theme in the interviews is that English is a means of communication rather than a sign of linguistic imperialism. In other words, nearly all of the interviewees regarded English simply as a tool or medium to promote the distinctiveness of Chinese culture and the preservation of it. They consented on the fact that learning English is a pragmatic means to achieve the ends of either personal career development or ways to promote Chinese culture and enhance outsiders' understanding of the Chinese context.

'Being able to speak English is a better way to communicate with the Western world and gain more information from people around.'

Victoria

Echoed by:

'Language is more likely an instrument for getting more international opportunities.'

Lilian

'What the Chinese government is thinking about when they educate us in English is to let us explore the world, to enhance ourselves when abroad to further contribute to our country when we get back.'

Luke

‘Learning English for Chinese students does not indicate a clash between globalisation and anti-Westernisation. But English is a ‘global language’ serving as a platform to get people from different cultures to grow closer.’

Chris

Further, some of them contended that learning English reinforces their sense of national identity. They claimed that getting exposed to English or other languages allows one to compare his/her own culture with the others. In which case, the values and virtues of their culture might be set in contrast and hence further strengthen their beliefs of their own ‘unique’ identities. The above claims of the interviewees could shed light upon Pavlenko’s article (2003) where she argues that there are two options of how foreign language learners attempt to form oppositional identities in language classrooms: they either reject the languages imposed on them or discard the dominant national identity and opt for an alternative one through the medium of foreign language. However, through the coding of interview, almost none of the interviewees fit into either pattern, because they both kept their strong original Chinese identity and embraced the English language at the same time for pragmatic reasons. In other words, this paper contributes an alternative pattern of relationship between foreign language and national identity in the Chinese case.

4.3 Language is a *necessary yet insufficient* condition for fostering one’s sense of national identity

4.3.1 Background variables

‘It is necessary for language policies to exist in the construction of a national identity, but it can possibly be overridden by other factors, the background factor is especially influential.’

Chris

a) Family background matters:

Victoria contends that her parents are keen on promoting Chinese culture: calligraphy, philosophy (e.g. Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, etc.) and her father uses authentic Chinese idioms regularly. She therefore needs to be skilled at the traditional Chinese literature to communicate with her family.

As demonstrated by Adamson and Wang (2009), some local Zhuang cadres in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous region did not wish their children to learn Zhuang language. The Zhuang-Chinese bilingual education was never formally adopted, though the policy on prioritizing the Zhuang language had been discussed and revised several times.

b) Educational background matters:

‘The British upbringing is more liberal and I was educated in a British boarding school which allowed me to mimic the British culture and form a closer bond with the locals.’

Charlie

As argued by Pike's (2000) article, educational background, which he coined *'institutional culture'* had a significant impact on one's sense of national identity. Thus, national culture and institutional culture work together to generate one's national image.

4.3.2 Cultural variables

a) Ideology and philosophical values matter:

‘China has a set of values that is consistently different from other cultures. Say respecting your parents, working hard for your children and conforming to authority. The Confucius philosophy flows through the Chinese culture.’

Matthew

According to Westad (2012), some part of the official propaganda had struck a chord with the youngsters' aspiration for 'something to believe in'. As China is increasingly internationalised, it is important to keep something '*truly and uniquely Chinese*' rather than imitating the West completely. Such importance is illustrated by the unprecedented determination of China to fortify what Deng Xiaoping coined the '*Socialist Model with Chinese Characteristics*'.

b) Literature matters:

'References to Chinese literature as you learn the Chinese language makes a Chinese 'Chinese'.'

Charlie

Echoed by:

'I think a good example of this is poems in the 1920s, I cannot get the same feeling from reading that poem in Cantonese as when I read it in Putonghua because there is more of a genuine sense to it.'

Chris

As argued by Fenollosa and Pound, the Chinese written character served as a medium for poetry, which provides the Chinese with a distinct sense of historical superiority and cultural heritage that gradually formed their national identity. The poetry and traditional Chinese ancient literature referred to by Charlie and Chris also help to reduce the barriers of the variations between different dialects, thus forming a consensus and cohesion among individual Chinese.

c) History matters:

During the interviews, we asked the question of the interviewees opinions on the relationship between globalisation and orientalism and whether language or language policy plays a crucial role in forming the sense of linguistic orientalism. Several of our interviewees argued that specific historical context actually influenced the ways both the government and the local individuals consider of the foreign

language. For example, Victoria argued from a historical standpoint that the late period of the Qing dynasty banned missionaries from Europe, which is a kind of expression of anti-globalisation. China might have had the power to be self-sufficient, but it is not possible now. The world is actually globalised, so it is necessary to adapt to the situation. Thus she argued that learning English is a pragmatic tool for one to adapt to the current stage of history.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, nearly all of the interviewees agree that the standardisation of Mandarin has served as a positive force to foster a national identity. In terms of the impacts of English imposition, it is primarily perceived by the interviewees as the *de facto lingua franca* of international communication as opposed to the '*lingua frankensteinia*' (Philipson, 1993) that could detract from a sense of being Chinese. Taking it further, some even argue that the so-called English imposition sets the values and virtues of Chinese culture in contrast, allowing them to re-emphasise their national identity.

Nevertheless, this research acknowledges that all the interviewees are from economically privileged background compared to the majority of the Chinese population. In addition, there are 56 Chinese ethnicities yet all but one interviewee is Han-Chinese. Hence, the insights of the interviewees are not representative of all Chinese.

As aforementioned, Chinese culture must be well-preserved in the midst of realising President Xi Jinping's *Chinese Dream* to secure symmetrical intercultural communication. This research recognises that the notion of national identity cannot be delineated without taking into account the political, ideological and historical contexts. More notably, language is found to be a *necessary yet insufficient* condition for fostering one's sense of national identity. As such, we suggest that further research could investigate deeper the intrinsic links between language and other elements that form national identity. Moreover, a broader sample size of interviewees involving a greater demographic range would offer a more thorough and objective investigation into the impact of language on the sense of national identity. After all, '*it's about loving Chinese*' (Matthew).

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Appendices

a) Information pack

Exploring the impact of Chinese language policy on Chinese students' sense of national identity

Name of researcher:

LSEGROUPS, LSE

(Tim He, Nicolina Kalentery, Regina Lai, Linda Liu, Emad Naghavi)

INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for considering participating in this study which will take place on 03 June 18. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant, if you agree to take part.

1. What is the research about?

The aim of this research is to *explore* the impact of Chinese language policy on Chinese students' sense of national identity. There are two facets to 'language policy' – *local* language policy concerns Article 9 to 20 of the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Language* as promulgated by Order No. 37 of the President of the People's Republic of China on 31 October 2000 whilst *foreign* language policy concerns the mandate as issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2001 which stipulates that English must be taught in Chinese public schools beginning in Year 3, with the option of initiating English instruction as early as Year 1. In terms of 'impact', we endeavour to *investigate* Chinese students' *experience* of Chinese language policy and how it impacts on their sense of national identity (if any).

This research endorses both *a primary and secondary qualitative methodology* whereby we will conduct in-depth interviews with ten participants and will collect data from secondary sources, viz. the literature.

2. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you do decide to take part, we will ask you to sign a consent form which you can sign and return in advance of the interview or sign at the meeting.

3. What will my involvement be?

You will be involved in a 20-minute in-depth interview regarding your experience of Chinese language policy and its impact on your sense of national identity (if any). As the interview will be recorded, a transcript will also be produced. As such, you will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors after the interview.

Where necessary, any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed.

As for the actual record, it will be destroyed after the completion of this research.

4. How do I withdraw from the study?

You can withdraw at any point of the study, without having to give a reason. If any questions during the interview make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them and you can withdraw from the interview at any time for any reason. Withdrawing from the study will have no effect on you. If you withdraw from the study, we will not retain the information you have given thus far, unless you are happy for us to do so.

5. What will my information be used for?

We will use the collected information for this particular research project.

6. Will my taking part and my data be kept confidential? Will it be anonymised?

The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. Only *ourselves* and *our supervisor* will have access to the files and any audio tapes. Your data will be anonymised – your name will not be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. All digital files, transcripts and summaries will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Any hard copies of research information will be kept in locked files at all times.

7. What if I have a question or complaint?

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the interviewers, Regina Lai or Linda Liu, on h.c.lai@lse.ac.uk or x.liu56@lse.ac.uk respectively.

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the LSE Research Governance Manager *via* research.ethics@lse.ac.uk. To request a copy of the data held about you, please contact: glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk.

If you are happy to take part in this study, please sign the consent sheet attached.

b) Consent form

Exploring the impact of Chinese language policy on Chinese students' sense of national identity

Name of researcher:

LSEGROUPS, LSE

(Tim He, Nicolina Kalentery, Regina Lai, Linda Liu, Emad Naghavi)

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