Basis of ethnic identification in Taiwan

Mei-chih Li
National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan

Seven hundred and twenty-six adult subjects in Taiwan categorized themselves into one of six identities: Taiwanese, Taiwanese but Chinese too, Chinese, Chinese but Taiwanese too, new Taiwanese, or general Chinese. The six identity groups had almost equally high rating scores of Taiwan on an index of social identification, but differed in their degree of identification with China. Participants who incorporated Taiwanese as a part or the whole of their self-identity were psychologically distant from China. By investigating the relationship between ethnic identities chosen by people in Taiwan and their social identification with Taiwan versus China as two categories of nationalism, the results of the present study indicate that the bases of Chinese identification are mainly cultural and have a historical connection with China, while the basis of Taiwanese identification is mainly the sharing of life space in the Taiwanese district from which the people have acquired a kind of primordial attachment, regardless of their ethnic identity.

Key words: Chinese, ethnic identification, life space, social identification, Taiwanese.

Introduction

The issue of ethnic identity has always been a topic of concern in the fields of anthropology, sociology, archaeology, history and linguistics. At the turn of the 20th century, ethnic identity increasingly became a basis for nationalism. The concept of nation as a well-defined political group did not actually exist before the early 20th century in most areas of the world (Gellner, 1983). Ethnicity has been used as a basis for defining a nation and as the reason for forming an independent nation in many areas of the developing world as part of the struggle against Western colonization. Formation of a nation in this manner depended on identification of a common ethnic group, which was generally considered to be objectively definable in terms of shared lineage, language, religion and other cultural characteristics.

However, American anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969) strongly argued against this traditional viewpoint and proposed that ethnicity is relatively subjective. Barth proposed that motivations, such as realistic expectations, fear or hostility, cause people to assemble their ethnic identities through collective memory construction and structural amnesia of history. Once people identify a certain group as their own, they construct their similarity with that group with a bias towards shared characteristics. In contrast, if they identify another group as an outgroup, they will emphasize their dissimilarity from that group. (Turner et al., 1987)
The people of Taiwan share a number of ethnic characteristics with the people of mainland China, such as language, history and cultural heritage. The government of China considers the people of Taiwan to be of common ethnicity. This shared ethnicity forms a part of China’s claim that China and Taiwan should be unified as one nation. However, the people of Taiwan do not accept Chinese as their sole ethnic identity, although approximately 98% of Taiwan’s population is viewed as Han Chinese. Various alternative ethnic identities exist. Because the two main groups of Han Chinese living in Taiwan are either long-time immigrants or newcomers from mainland China at different periods of historical time, they have a different memory of mainland China and Taiwanese history. Taiwanese have experienced events, such as colonial occupation by Dutch and Japanese governments, and the 28 February massacre of Taiwanese by Chiang Kai-shek’s military in 1947. In terms of social representation theory (Moscovici, 1988; Liu et al., 2002), it can be expected that they would have acquired different representations of their past and their relationship with China, as such, ethnic identification in Taiwan is complex and, at times, polemical.

At present, approximately 80% of Taiwan’s population is descended from ancestors who immigrated from mainland China two to three hundred years ago. About 18% came to Taiwan or are descended from those who came to Taiwan between 1945 and 1949. Many people in Taiwan consider this to be an important distinction. The remaining 2% are Aborigines. According to self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), people tend to identify him/herself with certain significant groups. It is interesting to investigate the bases of group identification of people in countries with a geographically and politically separated history like Taiwan and China.

Based on Barth’s (1969) theory of constructive identity, Taiwanese anthropologist M. K. Wang (1997) proposed two foundations of ethnic identity: (i) lineage nepotism; and (ii) cultural nepotism. Lineage nepotism emphasizes psychological or subjective judgments about an assumed common lineage. That is, people tend to feel more intimate with those people who are assumed to have the same lineage than with those who are assumed not to, whether lineage is actually shared or not. Cultural nepotism has the same implication; people feel more intimate with those with whom they feel they share a common culture.

I contend these two bases for ethnic identification are not complete in the case of identification with either Taiwan or China for people living in Taiwan. I propose a third basis for ethnic identification as life space nepotism in anthropological terms, or social identification by life space in social psychological terms. Life space refers to the psychological field for each individual that is familiar and meaningful relative to the satisfaction and frustration of needs (Lewin, 1935). When referring to the issue of social identification, one’s psychological field is largely overlapped with the living space he/she shares with others. Within this psychological field, there are familiar people, lands, institutions, modal behavior patterns and social events. Life space nepotism entails a kind of primordial attachment to the land where one lives, works and interacts with familiar others (Shills, 1957; Geertz, 1963; Keyes, 1981; Latane & Liu, 1996). The meaning of life space nepotism is similar to the concept of mere exposure. Individuals like the stimuli to which they are frequently exposed (Zajonc, 1968; Bornstein, 1989). It is proposed that the sentiments of mutuality and familiarity resulting from shared life space can make up a common social identification for people who live in the same geographical area for a long time.

Two possible categories of nationality exist for the people of Taiwan: Taiwanese or Chinese. Because of the current political complexities surrounding Taiwanese nationhood, the categories of ‘nationality’ and ‘ethnicity’ are mutually interpenetrating. A person in
Taiwan may be culturally and politically Taiwanese, culturally and politically Chinese, or a mixture of the two. Now, six possible categorical identities exist: (i) Taiwanese; (ii) Chinese; (iii) Taiwanese but Chinese too; (iv) Chinese but Taiwanese too; (v) new Taiwanese; and (vi) general Chinese. Identification with Taiwanese implies complete exclusion of Chinese as ingroup members. Identification with Chinese entails inclusion of Chinese both in Taiwan and mainland China as ingroup members. Two newer identities as well as the double identity of (iii) and (iv) have emerged to try and deal with the political complexities of Chinese ethnicity versus nationality. New Taiwanese is an identity recently created by politicians in an attempt to cover those people who identify with the land of Taiwan regardless of whether their family’s immigration to Taiwan was 200 or 50 years ago. It excludes Chinese in mainland China as ingroup members. By contrast, general Chinese (hua ren) denotes a collective category of people whose ancestors supposedly originated from the Yellow River in north China about 3000 years ago. Hence, the identity of general Chinese extends to Chinese descendants who have already become citizens of non-Chinese countries as well as those who are citizens of ROC in Taiwan and PRC in mainland China (Tzeng, 2000).

In accordance with the self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), I hypothesized that people who indicate Chinese as their only identity will show more identification with China than those who incorporate Taiwanese or New Taiwanese into their ethnic identity. Those who endorse both Taiwanese and Chinese as their ethnic identity will show moderate identification with China, ranking in between those who endorse solely Chinese or Taiwanese.

One might expect that endorsement of Chinese identity would reduce favorable attitudes towards Taiwan. However, based on my conceptualization of life space nepotism, as most participants of the present study were born and grew up in Taiwan regardless of their immigration background, Taiwan is their most familiar life space. I therefore expect almost equally favorable attitudes towards Taiwan regardless of their different ethnic identity.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Seven hundred and twenty-six adults answered the questionnaire. Participants were from different areas of Taiwan. Most were solicited from classes of various civil servants who participated in an on-the-job training program offered by the Government’s Official Training Center where the researcher was invited as one of the lecturers. There were 476 male and 250 female participants, aged from 16 to 74, with an average age of 35.

**Materials**

The questionnaire entailed two parts. The first part displayed Venn diagrams of closeness circles (Uleman et al., 2000) to measure degree of social identification with Taiwan, China, or general Chinese. Seven images displayed a small circle paired with a large circle with increasingly less distance between them. The participant was instructed to think of the small circle as representing him/herself, and the big circle as representing Taiwan/Taiwanese (or China/Chinese or general China/general Chinese). The participant was requested to indicate which distance between the small and the large circle best reflected his/her feeling of the relationship between him/herself and the designated target group on five dimensions: cultural
similarity, shared extent of common history, same language, feeling of closeness, and sense of belonging. The sharing of culture, history and language has frequently been used by cultural anthropologists and socio-anthropologists as the basis for defining ethnic groups (Wang, 1997). In addition to these three dimensions, two more dimensions: feeling of closeness, and sense of belonging were added in the present study because of their more subjective and psychological connotations. The chosen graph was transformed into points on a scale from one to seven. The higher the score, the more favorable the feeling towards the designated group.

In the second part of the questionnaire, participants provided demographic information including the date they or their ancestors came to Taiwan. They also indicated their categorical identification with one of six choice described above: (i) Taiwanese; (ii) Taiwanese but Chinese too; (iii) Chinese; (iv) Chinese but Taiwanese too; (v) new Taiwanese; or (vi) general Chinese.

**Procedure**

Group sessions were conducted with 95% of the participants. Remaining participants were met individually. Instructions were given both orally and typed on the questionnaire along with the measured variables. Researchers explicitly expressed that the purpose of this research was to study the group identification of people in Taiwan. Participants took approximately 20 min to complete the questionnaire.

**Results and Discussion**

Three participants’ data were discarded because of too many missing responses. All participants’ scores on the five dimensions of social identification with Taiwan, China, and general China were first analyzed for intercorrelations.

Three conclusions could be drawn from the results: (1) With respect to each individual target group (Taiwan/China/general China), correlations between all pairs of the five rating variables were highly significant. Factor analyses by principal component analysis and rotation by direct oblimin method were carried out with the measures of the five variables for Taiwan, China, and general China to check whether items clustered as one factor. The results indicated that the five variables clustered together as one factor for each target group with $\alpha=0.90, 0.91$ and 0.95. Factor loadings ranged from 0.82 to 0.94, with 76.2% of the total variance accounted for. Thus, the five variables could be combined to form an index of social identification.

(2) The pair-wise correlations between identification with China and general China were all larger ($r_s$ from 0.47 to 0.58) than those between identification with Taiwan and China ($r_s$ from 0.02 to 0.26), or between identification with Taiwan and general China ($r_s$ from 0.12 to 0.22). This result may imply that in the minds of participants, Taiwan as a group category is distinct from China either as a political unit or as a super-ordinate culture Chinese.

(3) On the dimensions of shared culture, language and history, all 15 correlations between Taiwan and China reached significance ($r_s$ from 0.10 to 0.26; $ps<0.001$). However, on the dimensions of closeness and belonging, only one in 10 correlations between Taiwan and China were significant ($r=0.114, p<0.01$; other $r_s$ from 0.02 to 0.06; NS). The hypothesis that the measures of closeness and belonging are more subjective than those of culture, language and history was supported by this result. Furthermore, with regard to China, the
combined mean scores of shared heritage, language and history (4.48) and the combined mean scores of closeness and belonging (3.69) were significantly different ($t = 18.00, p < 0.001$). However, on both sets of measurements, none of the participants completely denied a connection with China when referring to the distance between the small and large circles in the Venn diagram. As participants’ ratings for general China were similar to those for China, hereafter I will refer only to the two nationality/ethnicity categories, Taiwan/Taiwanese and China/Chinese.

During the early years of the KMT government of Taiwan, a person’s ethnic identity was officially decided by one’s father’s lineage. Civilian identification cards denoted a person’s ancestors’ residency. People were deemed outer-province people if their father was born in any province of mainland China, otherwise they were considered inner-province people, meaning that they were descendants of earlier immigrants from China. If participants in the present study identified their ethnicity based on their parents’ or ancestors’ migration date to Taiwan, only two ethnic categories would result (80% Taiwanese and 18% Chinese). However, a different distributive pattern emerged: pure Taiwanese and Chinese identities amounted to 28.7% and 11.9%, respectively. Thirty-nine point two percent considered themselves Taiwanese/Chinese, 11.0% defined themselves as Chinese/Taiwanese, 7.3% of participants choose New Taiwanese, and only 1.9% chose general Chinese. Because of its small number, results for those who chose general Chinese are not shown.

Figure 1 addresses the hypothesis that categorical identity relates to the degree of social identification with Taiwan versus China. A mixed MANOVA was run with categorical identity as the between-subjects variable and the degree of identification with China and Taiwan as the within-subjects variable. There was a significant interaction effect between categorical identity and degree of identification with China and Taiwan ($F(4, 696) = 68.71, p < 0.001$). Post-hoc tests indicted that participants with a pure Taiwanese categorical identity had a stronger social identification with Taiwan ($M_s = 5.99$ vs $5.15, 5.67, 5.37, 5.26$ for New Taiwanese, Taiwanese/Chinese, Chinese/Taiwanese and Chinese, respectively). Figure 1 also shows that endorsement of Taiwanese identity (Taiwanese ($M = 3.24$), New Taiwanese

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1** Relationship between ethnic identity and extent of social identification with two national categories. ●, Taiwan; ▲, China

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Acceptance of Chinese identity (Chinese, \(M=5.18\)) or double identity but with Chinese first (Chinese/Taiwanese, \(M=5.25\)) was associated with closer feelings towards China, whereas, Taiwanese/Chinese (\(M=4.34\)) was in-between.

As all participants in this study grew up and lived in Taiwan, it was expected that participants would demonstrate social identification by life space towards Taiwan but not towards China. As expected, regardless of stated ethnic identity, all participants showed high identification with Taiwan.

Similar results have been obtained in Hsiao and Fang’s (2001) survey study in which they found that descendants of people who immigrated to Taiwan hundreds of years ago tend to think that people who came to Taiwan between 1945 and 1949 and their next generation did not love Taiwan as much as them. However, their results showed that while the more recent immigrants to Taiwan and their offspring do have more affectionate connections with China than descendants of earlier immigrants, their love for Taiwan is almost as high as the former group of people.

According to the constructive viewpoint (Barth, 1969; Wang, 1997), there is never a clear-cut boundary nor complete identification between related ethnic groups. On a continuum of characteristics from identical to dissimilar used to differentiate oneself from a designated group, a person may choose different points in accordance with personal preferences and values. Ethnic identification is a constructive process. This proposition is clearly reflected in the results of the present study. The subjective component of ethnicity for the people in Taiwan may be positively influenced by the connection between Taiwan and China through the lineage-history connection, and negatively influenced by historical separation and political conflicts between the two sides (Kao & Li, 2000). That is, descendants of more recent immigrants have more memories of China and share no connection to those historical tragedies that happened between Taiwan and China. Descendants of earlier immigrants are just the opposite.

Indirect evidence for this argument is also provided in Figure 2, in which participants are categorized into three groups: (i) both parents are of early immigrant origin (old, old); (ii)
the father is a recent immigrant and the mother a descendant of earlier immigrants (new, old); (iii) both parents are recent immigrants (new, new). The mean scores of identification with China for the three groups, (i), (ii) and (iii) were 3.39, 4.56 and 5.40, respectively. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was highly significant ($F_{2,676} = 47.25, p < 0.000$). Means for the three groups towards Taiwan were 5.92, 5.78, and 5.55, respectively, and these were not significant ($F_{2,676} = 1.92, p > 0.05$).

To determine the combination of variables that differentiate pure Taiwanese from pure Chinese categorical identity, a discrimination analysis technique that integrates factor analysis and multivariate analysis (Johnson & Wichern, 1988) was applied. Two hundred and five participants (28.2%) used the category of pure Taiwanese to define themselves, and 85 (11.7%) participants used the category of pure Chinese to define themselves. Table 1 shows the results. Using a standard discrimination function, 93.7% of the pure Taiwanese categorical identity and 67.1% of the pure Chinese categorical identity could be correctly classified. The results of the structure matrix indicated that the important variables differentiating pure Taiwanese and pure Chinese categorical identity were the immigration category the person belonged to, and the five dimensions used to rate China that collectively comprise an index of social identification with China.

The rating of social identification with Taiwan did not contribute much to the obtained discriminate function. This result is compatible with the results shown in Figure 1. In summary, those people of pure Taiwanese and Chinese categorical identity can be differentiated by their immigration background and their attitude towards China, but not by their attitude towards Taiwan.

The rise of nationalism in the 20th century argued for ethnicity as a basis for forming a nation. The government of China certainly accepts this view. For the people and government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Ethnic identity category</th>
<th>Standard discriminate functions</th>
<th>Structure matrix</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>coefficients</td>
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<td>Belonging to China</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>0.447</td>
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<td>Closeness to China</td>
<td>2.53</td>
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<td>Shared history with China</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>0.285</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language similarity with China</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>0.176</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural similarity with China</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>-0.149</td>
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<tr>
<td>Immigration category</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging to Taiwan</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>-0.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to Taiwan</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>-0.190</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared history with Taiwan</td>
<td>5.77</td>
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<td>0.036</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language similarity with Taiwan</td>
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<td>5.51</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural similarity with Taiwan</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>-0.037</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wilks’ Lambda = 0.536, Eigenvalue = 0.86.

There were three immigration categories: (i) descended from early immigrants; (ii) fathers are descended from early immigrants, mothers are new immigrants; and (iii) parents were both new immigrants.

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of China, the people in Taiwan are also Chinese, and should be included in the category of Chinese.

However, despite being ethnically and culturally similar to those living on the other side of the Taiwan Strait, the people of Taiwan do not have a unified ethnic identity of being Chinese. Geographical and political separation over time appears to have resulted in the formation of the ethnic identity Taiwanese who reject the acceptance of China as their nation identity.

As demonstrated in the present study, ethnic identification depends not only on common language, history and culture, but also on psychological feelings of closeness and belonging. These feelings of closeness and belonging towards China appear to be lacking in many of Taiwan’s people, particularly those descended from early immigrants to Taiwan. Participants who defined themselves as Taiwanese showed less social identification with China than those who accepted Chinese as their identity or as part of their identity.

According to Rosch’s (1978) concept of prototype and family resemblance, while most people in mainland China can be viewed as a prototype of the Chinese, the people who inhabit the outer boundary of mainland China may view themselves or may be viewed as borderline Chinese, such as Tibetans, Mongolians and Taiwanese. Actually, in human history, national identity of a country develops gradually as more and more borderline groups finally identify themselves with the dominant group through a series of identification versus counter-identification processes. Borderline groups provide a good case for studying the bases of ethnic identity in the era of population mobility and social change. Barth (1969) provided a good metaphor for this process – it is the circumference which determines the shape of a circle.

Historically, wars frequently occurred in the borderline areas of a country due to border and ethnic conflicts. Taiwan as a physically and politically borderline area of mainland China is a good case for understanding the complex problem of ethnic and political identification in which some groups of people want to dissociate themselves from an originally united country. On the continuum of similarity–difference between two related ethnic groups on the aspects of language, culture and history, people of the borderline ethnic group have some leeway to shift their distance back and forth from the other group according to their psychological condition. The important finding of this research is that in addition to the well-known bases of lineage nepotism and cultural nepotism, life space nepotism is another important basis of social identification for people to develop primordial attachment to a land where they decide to settle down.

The present study has raised a few novel research questions about intergroup relation. For example, the people of Taiwan and China have increased their contact and communication with each other since 1987 after 50 years of complete separation. It should be interesting to study the proposition that in a short period of time, the contact and communication between the people of the two groups, which have a combination of cultural/historical connection and political conflict, may actually enhance the we/they or ingroup versus outgroup feelings. However, after a longer period of time, and given that no further serious conflict happens, the psychological boundary between the two groups may begin to dissolve because of the effect of frequent contact that gradually induces life space nepotism. It is also interesting to explore how the use of coercive forces by the dominant power may affect the identity of the less dominate group, and whether the use of force and threat will eventually increase the social distance and a sense of disunity between the two groups.
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