ABSTRACT

Being Chinese, one would assume there be no differences in "cultural identity" among all Chinese. However, this assumption does not apply in the context of Singapore. The issue of "cultural identity" has been controversial among many Chinese over the past few years.

In this study, the Chinese in Singapore are grouped under two general categories: the "Chinese-educated" Chinese and the "English-educated" Chinese. These two groups have gone through two different education systems which imparted different value orientations. Consequently, they tended to have differing identification with "Chinese culture".

The preliminary study attempts to survey and provide an explanation for the attitudes of these two groups of Chinese Singaporeans. Analysis is based mainly on English and Chinese newspaper clippings during the period 1988-1990 on the subject of Singapore Chinese "cultural identity".

A considerable number of "English-educated" Chinese appeared less enthusiastic to "Chinese cultural identity" than their Chinese counterparts. The causes of this attitude appear complex. It was argued at one level, that individual culture, such as the Chinese culture (and other minority cultures) is not in itself Singaporean culture; thus what was emphasized was "Singaporean culture" as such. At another level, the prestige of the Chinese language over a long period of time, has not been comparable with the English language in various aspects (socially, economically and politically). Singaporean culture and the various prestige seem to be closely associated with the English language itself (This does not suggest that individual English-educated concerned necessarily treat the three
elements of English language, Singaporean culture and prestige as one: unenthusiasm toward "Chinese cultural identity " could simply due to any one or two of the three elements). Thus the "image " of Chinese culture, which in our context is virtually inseparable with the Chinese language, did not appeal very much to English-educated Chinese.

"Chinese-educated " Chinese, not dismissing the importance of "Singaporean culture ", tend to be more emphatic of the actual existence and importance of individual cultures in Singapore, including the Chinese culture. More attention to Chinese culture, in the eyes of Chinese-educated, means some remedy to the previous negligence of that culture - a recognition of the value of their culture. The advantages English could bring about did attract a portion of the Chinese-educated to be bilingual.

It appears the overall response of the two groups toward the issue of "cultural identity " tended to be more polarized than balanced. Perhaps getting the best out of both worlds - the East and the West - a view rarely suggested by those engaged in the debate - is the more balanced attitude toward the issue.