



# Perception on Chinese values: A comparison of Chinese secondary students studying at national secondary schools and Chinese independent schools in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine whether different educational systems will impose students with different perception on Chinese values. Cluster sampling method was used and 599 Chinese students from three national secondary schools (NSS) and two Chinese independent schools (CIS) in Malaysia were recruited. A questionnaire containing two sections namely background information and Chinese value scale developed by [Chinese Culture Connection \(1987\)](#) was distributed. The findings showed that the practice of Chinese cultural values indicated through the use of Chinese language in everyday life between respondents from NSS and CIS is about the same, but more respondents from CIS read or watch Chinese materials than those from NSS. Respondents from CIS and NSS viewed integrity and tolerance as the most important Chinese value. Respondents from NSS perceived Confucians ethos or human relationship as more important, whereas respondents from CIS chose loyalty to ideals and humanity. The findings suggested that the role of parents in the perseverance of Chinese culture and the influence of different school environment are equally important in determining the perception of Chinese values among secondary school students.

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## 1. Introduction

Culture is a concept comprising multiple aspects shared by a large group of people ([Geertz, 1973](#)). The shared and permanent set of ethics, beliefs and attitudes in a country, region or organization are claimed to be embedded in a culture ([George & Zahra, 2002](#); [Hofstede, 2001](#)). [Hofstede's \(2007\)](#) definition of culture which is 'the collective programming of the mind which differentiates the members of one group of people from another' (p. 413) seems to synthesise the notion of culture. Since culture is a strategy that people have learned from generation

to generation aiming to deal with internal and external environment adaptation, it is believed that understanding the history of a society and its culture is a way to enhance one's understandings of a given person's world-view ([Inglehart & Carballo, 1997](#)). As culture has existed for a long time and is difficult to change ([Schneider, 1989](#)), people from a similar culture are therefore able to share some common schema, values and norm to interpret both the situation and humans' behaviours ([Vandewalle, Van Dyne, & Kostova, 1995](#)).

[Kraft \(1989\)](#) opined that culture could be categorized into deep-level culture and surface-level culture. The deep-level culture is usually referred to as values while the surface-level culture indicates cultural behaviour. Therefore, a close link between values and behaviours is observed where values are viewed as a principal driver of

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individuals' behaviours (Agle & Caldwell, 1999; Hemingway & Maclagan, 2004). In other words, values do not only refer to fundamental beliefs which are consistent with those traditionally held by most individuals in a particular society (Elasmr & Hunter, 1997), but they also refer to the ideas that influence and direct our choices or actions; for example, how we perceive situations and problems, how we make decisions and the kinds of decisions we make (Gini, 1998). Hofstede's (2007) belief on values being the core elements in culture that influence one's preference for certain state of affairs over the other substantiated the notion of value mentioned previously.

Generally, there are two types of values namely the Western values and traditional Chinese values. Differing culture and upbringing have resulted in the principles of traditional Chinese and Western values to be different. Western values according to Tan (2012) are usually associated with the term 'Western culture' in which the roots can be traced back to Greek and Kleiber (2004 as cited in Tan, 2012) who believed that Western values stemmed from Christianity generally. Tan (2012) associated Western values to equality, empowerment and ethics as well as three subsidiary values namely non-hierarchy, innovation and modernisation. Traditional Chinese values on the contrary are usually related to Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism (Soon, 2003). Confucianism revival appears to be strongly in place and it has been promoted vigorously by Chinese officials and the significance of its value is constantly promoted because they are believed to be able to provide China with the much desirable moral order (Rarick, 2008). The Chinese have a strong orientation towards the past and the ideas of elders and predecessors are thought of as practically imperial edicts. Patriotism, honesty, harmony, loyalty, filial piety, industriousness, hierarchy, integrity, conflict avoidance and adaptation are identified as the major themes of traditional Chinese values (J. Lee, 1996; Reisman, 1992; Zapalska & Edwards, 2001).

Even though there are differences between Western and Chinese values, most value measurements are created by Western social scientists and thus are not capable of capturing the unique Chinese cultural values. Therefore, Bond et al. designed a 40-item Chinese values survey (CVS) (*Chinese Culture Connection*, 1987). These 40-items were extracted from a pool of items that was collected from a number of Chinese social scientists who were asked to prepare a list of at least 10 'fundamental and basic values for Chinese people' (p. 145). The CVS was used by many past researchers to identify which CVS dimensions are accounted for the differences among their subjects in the business context. For instance, Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, and Terpstra (1993) assessed the differences and similarities in values among practicing managers in the US, Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China.

In contrast to the above mentioned, this study will examine whether different educational systems will impose students with different perception on Chinese values. Thus, a brief historical background that led to the development of Chinese education in Malaysia has to be discussed.

### 1.1. History of Chinese education in Malaysia

In 2013, Malaysian Chinese comprised about 21% of the total population of Malaysia (*Department of Statistics Malaysia*, 2013). Most of them migrated from southern China to Malaysia during the colonial period (late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries); during this time, the coloniser encouraged the recruitment of labourers from China and India (Li, 2003). The Chinese as well as their counterpart, the Indians were given the freedom to develop their own educational system under the British colonial government because they were seen as birds of passage who would return to their countries of origin after they had accumulated sufficient wealth (Gill, 2005).

However, the educational policies proposed since pre-independence caused the Chinese to face a lot of hindrances in developing and maintaining its school system. These policies included: (a) the Barnes Report of 1951 that proposed a national system of schools in which either Malay or English to be used as the only medium of instruction; (b) the Talib Report that made Bahasa Malaysia or Malay as the compulsory medium of instruction in secondary schools and universities; (c) the Education Act of 1961 that provided funding to Chinese secondary schools which had agreed to stop teaching in Chinese (Collins, 2006) and (d) the New Economic Policy that increased educational opportunities for Malay students but reduced them for Chinese and Indian students. Overall, Malaysia government achieved the goal of using Bahasa Malaysia or Malay as the medium of instruction at the secondary level by 1978, and in the universities by mid-1980s (Pong, 1994). Most Chinese regarded these policies as measures intended to phase out Chinese education in Malaysia.

The Malaysian Chinese was undeterred by those policies and reacted against them by trying to set up a private university that finally failed; it was followed by a storm of protests causing the 'Operation Lalang' to be arrested (G. K. Brown, 2007). The establishment of Chinese cultural societies drew the participation of Chinese community in the preparation of joint memorandum on national culture to be sent to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports of Malaysia (Shi, 2006). Recently, a rally was called to protest the lack of qualified Mandarin-speaking teachers in Chinese primary schools. The protesters demanded the government to take action to solve this long-standing issue (W. L. Lee, 2012; Meena Lakshana, 2012).

Having seen and experienced the challenges faced by their forefathers, most Malaysian Chinese uphold the importance of education as it is regarded as a crucial element in preserving their cultural identity. As a result, more than 90% of Malaysian Chinese today send their children to study at national-type primary schools rather than national primary schools (Segawa, 2007).

### 1.2. Chinese education in Malaysia today

In Malaysia, there are two types of schools at the primary level namely national schools and national-type schools, made up of Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools. Both are government funded, but the medium of instruction of national-type schools is Mandarin and Tamil while

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