Media exposure and Chinese cultural identity ☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a city-wide sample survey investigating the relationships between media exposure and Chinese cultural identity (CCI) along with its related constructs (CCI cognition, attitude, and behavioral intentions). The results indicate that CCI and its related constructs are positively affected by the degree of exposure to Chinese and foreign information in terms of both media format and media content.
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1. Introduction

With the rapid development of global communication, people around the world are exposing to a huge number of media messages that differ in content, cultural background, religion, and ideology. Consequently, traditional cultural identity, established and maintained mainly through communication within the nation-state boundaries, is also challenged by globalization. In a context of external global communication and internal societal transformation, Chinese cultural identity (CCI) faces more challenges than ever before. Current research studies the relationship between mass media and CCI, focusing on questions such as how media exposure (Chinese vs. foreign information) influences CCI, and explores the predictors of CCI and its related constructs.

2. Literature review

Cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to his own culture and cultural group. It is also a social psychological process of obtaining, maintaining and innovating individuals' own cultural assets (Yang, 2002). Accordingly, cultural identification is the process in which individuals accept the attitudes and behavior of a particular culture and constantly internalize the cultural value system and its behavioral code (Tan, 1998, p. 124). It is not innate but a cultivated, nurtured cognition subject to multiple social constructs such as language, customs, nation, religion, history, culture and power (Hall, 2003, pp. 208–223). These constructs used to be performed by different social institutions including family, community, school, church, etc., but this has now been replaced to a great extent by the information giant – global mass media. Mass media have therefore become the primary source in cultivating, establishing and even changing cultural identity in the digital era (e.g. Anderson, 2003; Wu & Simpson, 2007).

Studies focusing on media–identity relationships in western academic circles can be traced back to pioneers of decades past. According to Lasswell (1948), one of the four primary media functions is cultural transmission between generations. Thereafter, a great deal of academic research attempted to explore media–cultural relationships. Despite the many contradictory opinions, basic agreement has been reached by communication researchers: that is, the amount of media exposure is positively related to the mediated-reality. Although the question of media exposure and individual perceptions has been widely addressed by western scholars (e.g. Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Lasswell, 1948), little empirical research has been conducted in mainland China. In order to draw an overall picture of Chinese media exposure and CCI, current research focuses on the effects of the amount of media exposure (in terms of both media format and media content) on CCI and CCI-related constructs.

There are two main theoretical approaches to media–identity relationships. The first is represented by Anderson (2003) and his fellows, who focus on the role of media in constructing specific ethnic identity. This approach views mass media as a new and equally important, if not superior, socialization approach, which functions together with other social institutions (family, school, church, etc.) in establishing ethnicity, national and culture identification. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H1. The amount of media exposure to Chinese information will be positively associated with CCI and CCI-related constructs (CCIs).

RQ1a: Do CCIs vary based on the frequency of interaction with different media formats regarding Chinese information?
RQ1b: Do CCIs vary based on the frequency of interaction with different media content regarding Chinese information?

The second approach argues that media can help people enter other cultures, learn cultural norms, and adapt to new cultural identities while, at the same time, either maintaining their original cultural identity or living harmoniously together with the two identities (Wu & Simpson, 2007, p. 109). This approach focuses on the power of the media, which is not in line with one's established cultural identity, to influence and re-shape cultural identity. Therefore, we hypothesized that

H2. The amount of media exposure to foreign information will be negatively associated with CCIs.

RQ2a: Do CCIs vary based on the frequency of interaction with different media formats regarding foreign information?
RQ2b: Do CCIs vary based on the frequency of interaction with different media formats regarding foreign information?

3. Method

A survey was conducted in Wuhan, Hubei province, between September and October 2010. Being one of the major cities in central China, the political, economic, cultural and social conditions in Wuhan are representative of urban China. Also, its media industry development and media consumption are average for the country. Participants' demographic information, media usage habits and cultural identification were measured.

3.1. Population and sample

The population of the survey included all Wuhan residents above 18 years of age. Respondents were found through a combined random and systematic sampling process. Firstly, three of the seven main districts of Wuhan were selected randomly. Four communities were then identified in each district. The total residents of each of the four communities corresponded to the population size of each district. Next, residents in each community were visited at a 5-house interval. Only people above eighteen years of age were interviewed. If one family had more than one 18-year-old person, the one whose birthday was closest to that of the survey date was interviewed.

3.2. Procedure

Eighteen interviewers were selected from pilot respondents whose age, gender, occupation and marriage status were fairly representative. Interviewers were trained before visiting each house and interviewing the respondents. The respondents were told that the whole process was unprotected and that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the survey at any time.

3.3. Measurements and operationalization of constructs

Media exposure was measured by asking respondents to identify the frequency of their interaction with Chinese and foreign information through mass media on an overall level. Media format exposure was measured by asking respondents to describe the frequency of their interaction with Chinese and foreign information through different media formats: books, newspapers, films, radio, TV, Internet. Media content exposure was measured by asking respondents the frequency of their interaction with specific categories of Chinese and foreign information: political, economic, culture and education, entertainment, fashion, sports, military, advertising, and games. Frequency was measured on a five-point scale in which 5 = extremely frequent and 1 = never.

CCIs were measured by asking respondents about their knowledge of and attitude to culture-related constructs, as well as their behavioral intention to communicate and transmit Chinese culture. The culture-related constructs are adapted from Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) "culture dimension theory". Measurements included Chinese signs or symbols (such as the Dragon, Confucius, Huabiao, Tangsuit, Beijing opera, Traditional Chinese painting, Traditional Chinese medical science, kung fu, etc.), festivals (Spring Festival, Festival of Lanterns, Tomb-sweeping Day, Dragon Boat Festival, etc.), national characteristics (hard-working, loyalty and filial piety, kindheartedness, peace, wisdom, etc.) and cultural values (Heaven's thinking, regarding harmony as fundamentality, the concept of unity, etc.).

Cognitive CCI was measured by asking respondents to identify their familiarity with the above constructs on a 5-point scale, with 5 representing high familiarity and 1 no familiarity. Attitudinal CCI was measured by asking respondents "how much do you like _" on a 5-point scale, with 5 = very much, and 1 = not at all. Behavioral CCI was measured by asking "How much do you like to maintain/communicate___" on a 5-point scale, with 5 = very likely, and 1 = not at all likely.

Demographic information was also collected including age, gender, marital status, educational level, occupation, personal monthly income, etc.

4. Results

A total of 819 out of the 1100 respondents (89.9% of the overall sample) completed the survey. All respondents were between 18 and 30 years of age, 50.7% male and 49.3% female. Most of the respondents belonged to the Han ethnic group (94.0%). As regards educational level, 27.1% were high school or lower school graduates, 66.5% had or are studying for a bachelor degree, while 6.4% had a master degree or higher. As regards occupation, 25.8% were company employees, 21.4% were professionals, 16.6% were students, 30.7% were government officials, workers, farmers, or self-employed, while 5.5% did not indicate their occupation. The personal monthly income fell into in two ranges: from RMB 1 to 2000 (31.7%) and from RMB 2001 to 4000 (26.5%).

A one-way ANOVA was run to test H1. A significant association was noted between media exposure to Chinese information and CCI ($F(4, 815) = 12.33$, $p < .001$), cognitive CCI ($F(4, 815) = 13.99$, $p < .001$), attitudinal CCI ($F(4, 815) = 7.22$, $p < .001$), and behavioral CCI ($F(4, 815) = 6.12$, $p < .001$). H1 was supported.

A series of one-way ANOVA analyses were run to test RQ1a and 1b. As Table 1 shows, media exposure in terms of both media format and media content significantly and positively affected almost all CCIs. As regards media formats, TV exposure had the strongest effects whereas film was the least significant influential media format. As regards media content, political content was the strongest influential content type, followed by culture, education and entertainment. Economic, fashion and games media content exposure was not relevant for attitudinal and behavioral CCI.

A linear regression analysis was run to test RQ1a and RQ1b in more detail. As Table 2 shows, demographics failed to predict CCIs, but media exposure (both media format and media content) predicted CCIs well. As regards media format, only newspapers predicted all CCIs ($\beta_{CCI} = .170$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ cognition} = .125$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ attitude} = .128$, $p < .01$; $\beta_{CCI\ behavior} = .151$; $p < .01$), books ($\beta_{CCI} = .171$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ cognition} = .169$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ attitude} = .168$, $p < .001$) and the Internet ($\beta_{CCI\ cognition} = .153$; $p < .001$) explained some CCIs, whereas none of the remaining media formats predicted CCIs. As regards media content, only political ($\beta_{CCI} = .232$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ cognition} = .129$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ attitude} = .215$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ behavior} = .198$, $p < .001$) and culture and education ($\beta_{CCI} = .183$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ cognition} = .137$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ attitude} = .189$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{CCI\ behavior} = .099$, $p < .01$) information predicted all CCIs,