

A Study on Ethnic Identity Status and Its Contextual Factors among College Students of Bai Nationality in Yunnan

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Abstract—This study investigated the status of Bai college students' ethnic identity and examined the contextual factors which influence the formation of this Bai ethnic identity. A questionnaire which consists of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) and Contextual Factors (CF) was administered to 260 college students of Bai nationality from five universities in Yunnan Province. A stepwise regression analysis reveals that four contextual factors influence the formation of this Bai ethnic identity: subjects' place of residence, family, language proficiency, subjects' opinions and attitudes towards Bai and Han people and Bai and Han culture. Findings show that both male and female Bai college students are in the status of ethnic identity commitment, which means subjects are in high identification with Bai nationality. Gender difference is not so significant in the formation of Bai college students' ethnic identity. This identification contributes to the maintenance and transmission of Bai ethnic culture without the help of a written system of Bai language.

Index Terms—Bai nationality, college students, ethnic identity, contextual factors

I. INTRODUCTION

Bai people live in the southwest of China. According to the fifth national census conducted in 2000, the population of Bai minorities in China has reached 1.86 million. Most of them inhabit Yunnan province, others scatter around Sichuan and Hunan provinces. Bai is the second largest ethnic group of Yunnan province. They inhabit in compact communities in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture which used to be a cultural, political and economic center in Yunnan. Since the Dali Kingdom (937-1253A.D.), all the Bais in different areas has become a nationality with similar languages, cultures and economic systems (Huang, 2010).

As the main communication device, the Bai language, which is a spoken language without a written system, belongs to the Tibetan-Burma language branch of Sino-Tibetan language family. The Bai people take the white color in high esteem. Though Bai people believe in Buddhism and Taoism, they also worship "Benzhu" which is a village god. Benzhu can be the God of Nature, national heroes, famous officers or even animals such as horses and dragon. The March Fair is the grandest traditional festival at which people sell goods, hold sporting contests and provide singing and dancing performances. Different characteristics in language, religious believes, customs and traditions distinguish Bai nationality from the other 55 ethnic groups in China. The Bai had previously been known by a number of names. They were called as "Minjia", literally means "civilians". In 1958, the Chinese government compiled a list of nationalities and the Bai nationality as an ethnic label was officially recognized by both the Bai people themselves and others.

Bai people play an active role in the development of Yunnan province. While keeping their cultures and traditions, they adopt new culture elements to enrich their culture. With the increasing communications between people of different ethnic backgrounds, those Bais who leave their villages for profession and education purposes get more chances to communicate with different people. College students are the majority of those Bai people who leave their hometown. While they are receiving further education, they will meet students of different ethnic backgrounds. If they could be successful communicators who appreciate both their own and other's culture, their identity as a Bai people would be achieved within the process of cross-cultural communication. This achievement of ethnic identity is of great advantage to both the enhancement of Bai ethnic college students' intercultural communication competence and the maintenance of traditional Bai culture in a world of multiculturalism. Successful intercultural communication competence and an achieved ethnic identity are mutually promoted. So how these college students identify with Bai ethnic identity is a key factor to know how well they can keep their connection to Bai community as well as to a larger social context. In order to know a central aspect of ethnic identity held by Bai undergraduates from Yunnan province, this study is conducted.

Based on the background of the study, this research tries to answer the following two questions: 1. What's the status of ethnic identity of college students of Bai nationality in Yunnan province? 2. Which contextual factors influence the formation of this ethnic identity?

II. REVIEW OF RELEVANT STUDIES

During the last three decades a substantial amount of literatures and empirical studies have been written and conducted on the status of ethnic identity development.

The subjects of studies on ethnic identity conducted by international researchers can be roughly divided into two groups. The first group focuses on White subjects. In these studies, White subjects are included as a contrast group to ethnic minority group such as Hispanic, African American or Asian. The second group primarily focuses on Black subjects. Most of these studies are done in the United States. Topics of White ethnic groups and Black Americans are more than that of Asian Americans, Hispanics or American Indians. The majority of these articles are written from the aspect of psychology, but there are also literatures from sociology, anthropology, social work, and education.

Domestic researches on ethnic identity can be grouped into two categories: introductions to theoretical literatures of ethnic identity and empirical studies. Chinese scholars use western models to measure individuals of ethnic minority. But necessary adjustments are made to make those models fit the unique characteristics of Chinese ethnic groups. Subjects of minority nationality in the empirical studies are ranged from Tibetan (Wang, 2002; Wan & Wang, 2004), Hui (La, 2003), Uygur (Yan, 2008; Sun, 2009), Yi (Gong, 2009) to Korean (Yu, 2008), and so on. They are either adolescents or undergraduates (Shi, 2007). In these studies, the relationship between ethnic identity, acculturation and psychological well-being are discussed in great details. Their findings confirm that examining ethnic identity development is of significance. It could contribute a lot to the school counselors (Li & Shi, 2008) and to strengthen ethnic minority students' national identity and maintenance of ethnic cultures (Wang & Wan, 2004).

David's (1996) study shows that though cultural distinction between Bai and Han is less clear-cut, ethnic identity becomes sharply demarcated. It provides support for the present study because Bai people is culturally similar to the Han people, and this ambiguity of cultural boundaries may assimilate the Bai culture into Han culture, thus Bai people's ethnic identity will be demarcated. Luo (2008) concluded both males and females from rural areas get their ethnic identity strengthened after their participation in activities organized by gender-based rural associations.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. *Research Subjects*

Subjects for this study are from five universities in Yunnan Province: Yunnan University, Yunnan Normal University, Yunnan University for Nationalities, Yunnan Agricultural University and Kunming Science and Technology University. They are undergraduates of Bai nationality, which means subjects' ethnicity is known to the researcher. They are within the grade range of one to four. The participant pool (N=206) includes 114 females and 92 males. They are all from Jianchuan County, which is an administrative county of Dali Bai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan province. Jianchuan County has a population of 168,900 by the end of year 2003. With its 91.6% population of Bai nationality, it ranks the first county with the largest percentage of Bai nationality in China. People there use Bai language in daily communication, even in news broadcasts and school settings. Bai culture is dense and pervasive there.

B. *Research Instrument*

The research instrument is a questionnaire consisted of two parts: contextual factors concerned about students' background information (CF) and Phinney's Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM).

MEIM has a reliability of Cronbach alpha = .81 to .89, across ethnic groups (Phinney, 1992; Roberts and his colleagues, 1999). Phinney (1995) examined the construct validity of the MEIM with 5,423 students from diverse ethnic groups in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. The validity of the measures was substantiated. The scale in this present study was translated into and written in Chinese from MEIM for the Bai language does not have a written language. Reliability of the MEIM-translated version was determined by the procedure Cronbach's alpha, rendering a score of .73. Participants responded to these statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The score ranges from 1 to 5, signifying low to high ethnic identity status respectively. The validity of the questionnaire was substantiated. KMO and Bartlett Test rendered a score of .791. By taking the first part (CF) as the independent variable, the MEIM scale as the dependent variable (ethnic identity exploration and commitment as two dependent variables), KMO and Bartlett Test showed a significant level of .000. The questionnaire was also evaluated by professors and they substantiated its validity.

C. *Data Collection*

Participants were drawn from an organization called "the fellow-villager knows". It is a student-organized community through which undergraduates who come from the same place and enroll the same university are contacted. Community members have a union at the beginning of every school year to welcome the freshmen. In the present study, subjects were from the countryman- community of Jianchuan County organized by the five universities respectively. Before circulating questionnaires, the researcher requested those who were of Bai nationality to fill in a form to make sure that there is no participation of non- Bai-nationality students. Subjects were recruited from groups whose ethnicity is known to the researcher. Participants were asked to respond to the contextual factor measurement sheet and the MEIM measurement instrument (the two measurements were in Chinese). Each participant received a questionnaire

after they consented. They were informed that involvement in the study was completely voluntary and they would withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Each participant was asked to first respond to the contextual factor measurement sheet, then to the measurement instrument sheet. The Bai language is transmitted orally without a written system. During the process of data collection, oral Bai language served as the communication device, while the questionnaires were written in Chinese characters.

D. Data Analysis

Those questionnaires with missing choices were deleted as invalid ones. The remaining ones were numbered and input into SPSS 17.0 for Windows. The first part (CF) was the independent variable; the second part (MEIM scale) was divided into two dependent variables (ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity commitment as two dependent variables) according Phinney (1992)’s research suggestions. The data were analyzed by using Means, Pairwise Multiple Comparisons and Stepwise Linear Regress.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Bai college students’ ethnic identity status

Ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity commitment are taken as two variables in the present study and a Paired-Samples T Test was employed to examine the status of Bai ethnic identity. As shown in Figure 4.1, the mean score of ethnic identity commitment was higher than those of ethnic identity exploration. This suggests subjects are in the higher status of ethnic identity. In addition, correlation coefficient is 0.554 and the mean difference is significant ($p < 0.001$). The two factors were closely correlated ($t = -9.378$) as the previous studies have proved (French & Seidman, 2006).

FIGURE 4.1:
BAI ETHNIC IDENTITY STATUS

	N	Mean	S.D.	Correlation	Sig.	T
EIE mean	206	3.5922	0.54882	0.554**	0.000	-9.378
EIC mean	206	3.9105	0.47246			

Note: in Figure 4.1, EIE: ethnic identity exploration; EIC: ethnic identity commitment; N: number of the subjects.

Prerequisite of all the findings is that all the subjects self-identify themselves as a member of Bai nationality. The result of higher mean score of ethnic identity commitment than that of ethnic identity exploration is consistent with Phinney’s assumption (Phinney, 1992). Higher mean scores of ethnic identity commitment means minority members have a strong sense of affirmation, belong or commitment to their ethnic identity and are in a higher status of ethnic identity. This is also consistent with Erikson’s (1968) theory of identity development which posits that identity formation takes place through a process of exploration and commitment that typically occurs during adolescence. Subjects have a strong identification with their own culture at this status of ethnic identity. Phinney’s developmental model assumes that with increasing age, subjects are more likely to be ethnic identity achieved. College students are in young adulthood and need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success of this leads to strong relationships but failure of this result in loneliness and isolation.

Figure 4.1 shows that ethnic identity exploration and commitment are distinct factors but significantly correlated. However, the two levels of ethnic identity exploration and commitment should not be taken as separate dimensions. Since the formation of ethnic identity is developmental, the status of commitment is based on the process of exploration. Levels of identity would be sometimes mixed and sometimes overlapping because certain communications may cross and connects the various levels of identity.

Contextual factors that influence Bai ethnic identity formation

As Figure 4.2 shows, males and females are significantly different neither at ethnic identity exploration status nor at ethnic identity commitment status. Yet males scored a little bit higher than females at the means of both factors. This result is opposite to that of Ting-Toomey’s which assumed that women are the carriers of ethnic tradition and tend to be in higher status of ethnic identity compared with males (Ting-Toomey, 1999). A number of researches also agreed about the greater involvement in ethnicity by females than males. The unique traits of Bai culture can be an explanation to this phenomenon.

FIGURE 4.2:
GENDER DIFFERENCE IN BAI ETHNIC IDENTITY

	Gender	N	Mean	S.D.	F	Sig.
EIE Mean	Male	92	3.6022	0.52581	0.882	0.349
	Female	114	3.5842	0.56890		
EIC Mean	Male	92	3.9394	0.49088	0.388	0.534
	female	114	3.8872	0.45790		

Note: in Figure 4.2, EIE: ethnic identity exploration; EIC: ethnic identity commitment; N: number of the subjects.

Historically, Bai culture is deeply influenced by Confucianism, the ethical values of which emphasizes patriarchal

dominance at domestic disciplines, rules and regulations of the clan. Values that are favor of males such as "boys are better than girls" and "males are superior to females" also widely spread in Bai ethnic group. Due to the demands of social development, however, Bai females rank a comparatively high status in family and in social production. Customs of a matriarchal society coexist with that of a patriarchal society in communities of Bai nationality. Religious ceremonies are accessible to women. Family ethics and social morals value women's contributions. Research pointed out that this special existence of woman functions as complement and adjustment to patriarchal culture through educating young generations the importance of matriarchal ethics. Gradually, a dual structure of ethical education "patriarchal—matriarchal" is formed in Bai nationality area (He, 2008). This explains why Bai ethnic female students score almost the same as male students. Another explanation is that male and female subjects are from areas where Bai people live concentratedly. They are exposed to similar cultural atmosphere in which they are raised and cultivated. They tend to be consistent in viewing and feeling the outside world. Conclusively, Bai college students are in high identification with Bai ethnic identity and a Bai ethnic identity formation is regardless of gender difference.

Contextual factors influence Bai ethnic identity exploration

A Pairwise Multiple Comparisons could only determine which contextual factors are correlated to the Bai ethnic identity exploration; it still can't explain the causality between these contextual factors and Bai ethnic identity exploration. Thus, a stepwise regression analysis was employed. The results are shown in Figure 4.4.

FIGURE 4.4:
STEPWISE REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF BAI ETHNIC IDENTITY EXPLORATION

Contextual Factors	Beta	t	Sig.	R ²	F
Degree of difference between Bai and Han culture	-.207	-3.249	.001	.067 ^a	14.616 ^a
Bai language proficiency	-.196	-2.931	.004	.116 ^b	13.291 ^b
Han language proficiency	-.243	-3.792	.000	.163 ^c	13.086 ^c
Annual family income	-.145	-2.043	.042	.194 ^d	12.092 ^d
Father's educational level	-.134	-2.006	.046	.210 ^e	10.623 ^e

Note: Data in Figure 4.4 with letter "a" at top right corner signifies the R² value and F value when the first prediction variable enters regression equation. A letter "b" at top right means the R² value and F value when two prediction variables enter regression equation. So does letter "c", "d" and "e". (The same in Figure 4.6)

Figure 4.4 shows five factors negatively influence the formation of Bai ethnic identity exploration: degree of difference between Bai and Han culture; Bai language proficiency; Han language proficiency; annual family income and father's educational level. They could together explain the 21% variation of Bai ethnic identity exploration.

Contextual factors influence Bai ethnic identity commitment

A Pairwise Multiple Comparisons could only determine which contextual factors are correlated to the Bai ethnic identity commitment. It still can't explain the causality between these contextual factors and Bai ethnic identity commitment. A stepwise regression analysis is employed. The results are shown in Figure 4.6.

FIGURE 4.6:
STEPWISE REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF BAI ETHNIC IDENTITY COMMITMENT

Contextual Factors	Beta	t	Sig.	R ²	F
The necessity to maintain Bai traditional culture in modern society	-.202	-3.057	.003	.069 ^a	15.199 ^a
Bai language proficiency	-.231	-3.470	.001	.104 ^b	11.816 ^b
Han language proficiency	-.197	-3.045	.003	.143 ^c	11.252 ^c
Degree of difference between Bai and Han culture	-.166	-2.505	.013	.164 ^d	9.830 ^d
Nationality of teachers who have taught you	.143	2.182	.030	.183 ^e	8.964 ^e

Figure 4.6 shows the first four factors negatively influence the formation of Bai ethnic identity commitment: the necessity to maintain Bai traditional culture in modern society; Bai language proficiency; Han language proficiency; and degree of difference between Bai and Han culture. They could together explain the 16.4 % variation of Bai ethnic identity exploration. One factor positively influences the formation of Bai ethnic identity commitment: nationality of teachers who have taught the subjects. They could together explain the 18.3% variation of Bai ethnic identity commitment.

Discussions

Context plays an important role in ethnic identity development. No one can get an identity all by him/herself. Even in adolescence, identity could never be an individual achievement, but rather an outgrowth of mutual recognition; and just as for the infant, identity grows by being acknowledged and appreciated by others (Erikson, 1968). The influence of context depends on prior experience, the intergroup situation, and the current level of ethnic commitment. Research maintains that "commitment to the group is a crucial moderating factor that determines responses to the context"

(Ellemers et al., 1999:381). It is therefore important to consider the interaction of the person and the context. Ethnic identity formation is a complex, dynamic process involving both exploration and commitment.

The first factor is place of residence. Countryside background of subjects is accounted as a factor that influences Bai ethnic identity exploration. Ethnic identity has been found to be positively related to the ethnic density of the neighborhood (Garcia & Lega, 1979). In this study, countryside refers to the rural areas in Jianchan County, where Bai people live concentratedly. People there use Bai language to communicate, observe the traditional Bai customs and celebrate Bai holidays. Furthermore, teachers who had taught the subjects and their schoolmates are of Bai nationality. School environment still provide them with a dense Bai culture environment. These two levels are to their advantages in Bai ethnic identity exploration and commitment.

The second factor is family. A major influence on the development of ethnic identity in adolescence is the family. Families function as teaching younger generation important traditions and social skills. They give individual knowledge about his or her historical backgrounds; provide information regarding the permanent essence of his or her culture. Subjects gradually and unconsciously acquire specific behaviors, customs, traditions, and language associated with their ethnic or cultural groups.

Findings indicate that parents' educational level is negatively correlated to Bai ethnic identity exploration. The education parents received are the mainstream culture education (here it refers to the Han culture). The higher education parents received, the bigger the Han culture influences are on them. This leads to a stronger sense of independence, which is an embodiment of modern high-educated people's self-esteem and self-value. While transmitting Bai and Han knowledge and cultures to their youngsters, these well-educated Bai parents might make their own critical judgments. They might pay more attentions to the modernity and the development of Bai culture. Therefore, a negative influence on Bai ethnic identity formation from highly educated parents may lie in this. Furthermore, as the result shows, father's educational level influences Bai ethnic identity exploration. This can be explained by the dual structure of ethical education "patriarchal—matriarchal" in Bai nationality area. Since males scored a little bit higher than females both in Bai ethnic identity exploration and commitment, it is reasonable that father's educational level exerted larger influences on subjects' ethnic identity exploration. Family annual income also can be a predictor variable to Bai ethnic identity exploration. This is supported by Street's study which showed that annual family income was positively correlated with higher ethnic identity and adolescents of higher socioeconomic status reported more positive feelings of being members of their group (Street, 2009).

The third factor is language proficiency. Knowledge and usage of an ethnic language have been considered by some researcher to be key aspects of ethnic identity. As the results shown in Figure 4.4 and Figure 4.6, both the proficiency of Bai language and Han language can predict Bai ethnic identity exploration and commitment. This is supported by Giles and Coupland who argued that sometimes people use their in-group language to reinforce their in-group status and establish distance from the out-group. They may use the language of the out-group at other times in order to adapt to and align with the out-group (Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991). Bai ethnic students may speak Bai language when in neighborhood communities in order to preserve their history and roots and to reinforce their identification and bond as a people. The same students may speak Chinese at school because the teachers demand it.

Before discussing the influence of language, the usage of Bai and Han language in Jianchuan County is introduced first. Jianchuan County locates at the juncture where Nujiang, Diqing, Lijiang and Dali Prefectures meet. It is mainly inhabited by Bai people whose oral Bai language is the medium in their daily communication. For most of the local students (also subjects concerned in present study), Bai language is their mother tongue. When it is time for them to go to kindergarten or primary school, they begin to learn Chinese in school setting. Because Bai language does not have a written system, a new form of Bai language written character is created after the foundation of People's Republic of China, which is called *Pinyin* Bai language character, a phonetic system for transcribing Bai language characters. This newly created form is mainly used in illiteracy eradication program, bilingual teaching experiments and publication of books. But it has not been popularized yet. While communicating in Bai language in daily life, the subjects are immersed in Han language which is transmitted through devices of modern technology like TV, radio, computer, and so on. Nevertheless, both Bai language and Han language (Mandarin) are acquired by local students (and the subjects as well) unconsciously, naturally and rapidly in the daily surroundings.

Language performs the significant function of helping individuals construct and maintain their ethnic identity. A person's native language, thus, has deep significance because it is like the seed of identity that blossoms as children grow. Language helps individuals construct an identity that ties them to their in-group and at the same time sets them apart from other possible reference groups. Culture contributes to the construction of an individual's many identities. As the carrier of culture, language contributes to the construction of one's culturally based individual and group identities. Through language communication, an individual's multi-identities are enacted and enforced. Language presents not only information about one's identity, it also helps one express and maintain his/her identity.

Bai language is of great significance to Bai people. Through it, Bai culture is carried out and transmitted from generation to generation. As the means of communication in their daily life, Bai language also functions as a symbol of Bai people's ethnic identity, which will enhance their sense of belonging. However, a dichotomized perspective should be held on the usage of Bai language. It will enhance Bai people's ethnic identity in their in-group communication surroundings. But it will weaken their out-group communication competence if they still use Bai language to

communicate with out-group people.

The fourth factor is subjects' opinions and attitudes towards the differences between Bai and Han people and Bai and Han culture. Findings show that subjects think there is a great difference between Bai and Han people and Bai and Han culture at ethnic identity exploration period. An explanation is that at ethnic identity exploration period, subjects can only identify with their own group. At this status of ethnic identity formation, subjects may only explore whatever belongs to their own group. This result is different from those who posit that "there is no difference between Bai and Han people, Bai people are Han-characterizing". Their argument found its evidence in Gans (1996) who pointed out that in measuring ethnic identity, attitude studies tend to overemphasize the importance ascribed to it; ethnic groups may have more in common with one another than distinct differences, but that small difference is exaggerated because of the emotional importance placed on it by researchers and their participants. Thus, there arouses an argument that subjects of Bai nationality think the Bai culture differs from the Han culture while Han people think Bai people are becoming Han-characterized and cultural differences between Bai and Han nationalities no longer existed. It is, to some degree, because ethnic identity is a construct of avowal and ascription. Ethnic identity is avowed by in-group members and ascribed to in-group members by out-group members. From subjects' in-group perspective, the distinction between two cultures still exists during the process of exploring their ethnic identity.

The fifth factor is subjects' opinions and attitudes towards the importance of learning Bai culture and Han culture. As findings show, at ethnic identity exploration status, the significant level of "learning Bai culture is more important" is correlated with "learning Han culture is more important". However, at ethnic identity commitment status, the significant level of "learning Bai culture is more important" is correlated with "learning both of the cultures". Subjects show a change in attitudes towards the importance of learning Bai culture and learning Han culture. The explanation to this change is that a strong ethnic identity does not necessarily imply a weak relationship to the dominant culture. Contrarily, a strong agreement with the dominant culture can even prove subjects' improvement in cross-communication competence. In the status of ethnic identity commitment, while identifying with Bai culture, subjects can also approve of Han culture which shows subjects' intercultural awareness. This is supported by Triandis (1986) who argues that intercultural awareness is the cognitive perspective of intercultural communication. It emphasizes the changing of personal thinking about the environment through the understanding of the distinct characteristics of one's own and the other's cultures. Thus, subjects' acceptance of both Bai and Han cultures indicates they are aware of the intercultural difference. This awareness requires individuals to further find out the distinct characteristics of other cultures in order to effectively interpret the behavior of others in intercultural interactions.

V. CONCLUSION

Findings of the study confirms the reliability of Phinney's MEIM scale, which posits ethnic identity can be examined as ethnic identity exploration (the search status) and ethnic identity commitment (affirmation status, belonging stage and achievement status).

Bai college students involved in this study are in ethnic identity commitment status. They identify highly with Bai nationality. However, ethnic identity commitment is the wrap-up of ethnic identity affirmation, belonging and achievement, this study cannot tell precisely which status subjects are in, whether in ethnic identity affirmation status, belonging stage or in achievement status. Future studies are necessary to figure it out. Secondly, four contextual factors influence the formation of Bai ethnic identity: place of residence, family, language proficiency, opinions and attitudes towards Bai and Han people and Bai and Han culture. The result indicates that the impact of college students' gender difference on ethnic identity formation is contrary to previous related studies.

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