

Racialized Ethnicity: A Comparative Study of Chinese-Korean and Chinese Identities

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Abstract. This study examines how Chinese-Korean and Chinese individuals navigate their racialized ethnic identities in different socio-cultural contexts. Based on a survey of 44 participants, it highlights the dual influences of Korean heritage and Chinese nationality on Chinese-Koreans, in contrast to Han Chinese who experience identity within a dominant framework. While Chinese-Koreans express strong national pride, they face challenges in preserving their cultural heritage, particularly younger generations. Language preferences, social networks, and cultural knowledge reflect tensions between maintaining ethnic identity and adapting to Han Chinese society. The findings underscore the need for cultural preservation amid growing assimilation pressures.

Keywords: Racialized Ethnicity, Chinese-Korean Identity, Cultural Assimilation, Cultural Preservation, Social Integration.

1. Introduction

This paper explores how Chinese-Korean and Chinese individuals experience and navigate their racialized ethnic identities within distinct socio-cultural and national contexts. Drawing on the concept of racialized ethnicity, it examines how these two groups, despite their shared ethnic heritage, face different challenges shaped by historical, social, and political factors. Chinese-Koreans experience dual influences from their Korean heritage and Chinese nationality, while Han Chinese, as the ethnic majority in China, navigate identity within a dominant framework. Based on a survey with 44 responses, this study seeks to answer the question: How do Chinese-Korean and Chinese individuals experience and navigate their racialized ethnic identities within their respective socio-cultural and national contexts?

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Literature Review

1) *Racialized Ethnicity*

Racialized ethnicity refers to the process by which ethnic identities become intertwined with racial categorizations, shaping how individuals and groups are perceived and treated in society. It highlights the way race, as a socially constructed concept, influences the experiences of ethnic groups, often assigning them certain stereotypes, social roles, or levels of privilege based on their perceived racial identity (Grosfoguel, 2004). While ethnicity refers to shared cultural, linguistic, or ancestral traits, racialized ethnicity acknowledges that these ethnic identities can be subjected to racial categorization, impacting how individuals navigate social, political, and economic systems. This concept emphasizes that race and ethnicity are not neutral, but are shaped by historical, cultural, and power dynamics that can lead to marginalization or privilege depending on the context (Leistyna, 2001). In short, racialized ethnicity shows how ethnicity and race interact, often reinforcing social hierarchies and shaping people's lived experiences in distinct ways.

2) *Chinese Racialized Ethnic Identities*

Chinese racialized ethnic identities are shaped by the complex interplay of ethnicity, nationality, and race, influenced by both internal dynamics within China and external global perceptions. Within China, the Han Chinese constitute the ethnic majority, and their identity is often constructed as the

national norm, while ethnic minority groups such as Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Chinese-Koreans experience their ethnic identities through a lens of marginalization and othering. The state's policies and narratives around ethnic harmony and unity, underpinned by the ideology of Han cultural superiority, contribute to the racialization of non-Han ethnic groups, assigning them subordinate roles in the socio-political hierarchy (Ang, 2022). Internationally, Chinese identity is often racialized through the global lens of "Asian" as a racial category, which flattens the diversity of Chinese ethnicity and subjects' Chinese individuals to racial stereotyping and prejudice. These internal and external racializing forces affect how Chinese people, whether Han or ethnic minorities, navigate their identities, shaping their interactions with broader society and impacting their experiences of belonging, marginalization, or privilege (Tong, 2011). This dynamic illustrates how racialized ethnic identities are not fixed but are shaped by historical, political, and cultural forces both within and beyond national borders.

3) Chinese-Korean Racialized Ethnic Identities

Chinese-Korean (Joseonjok) racialized ethnic identities are shaped by their dual positioning within both Chinese and Korean socio-cultural frameworks, as well as their minority status within China. As ethnic Koreans living predominantly in northeastern China, Chinese-Koreans experience a racialized identity marked by their distinct cultural heritage and linguistic differences, which set them apart from the Han Chinese majority. In China, Joseonjok are often racialized as a model minority, perceived as industrious and loyal to the state, while simultaneously experiencing marginalization and cultural assimilation pressures (Kang, 2008). Their identity is also complicated by their connection to South Korea, where they are often seen as outsiders or second-class citizens despite their Korean ancestry, highlighting the transnational dimension of their racialized identity (Jiang, 2018). Furthermore, as a minority group in China, the Joseonjok's experiences of racialization are influenced by state policies that aim to maintain ethnic harmony but often privilege Han cultural dominance. These layered experiences of racialization reflect the broader tensions of living as an ethnic minority within China, while also navigating a cross-border identity with Korea, which creates a unique set of challenges in terms of belonging, cultural preservation, and social status.

4) The socio-economic relationship between Chinese-Koreans and Han

The socio-economic relationship between Chinese-Koreans and Han Chinese is shaped by both historical migration patterns and contemporary economic disparities. Historically, Chinese-Koreans have maintained a unique socio-economic position in China, particularly in northeastern provinces like Jilin, where many have settled as farmers or small business owners. Despite their minority status, Chinese-Koreans were historically perceived as industrious and well-educated, benefiting from policies aimed at promoting ethnic minority welfare (Park, 2003). However, economic reforms in the late 20th century, coupled with increasing migration to South Korea for labor opportunities, have led to socio-economic stratification within the Chinese-Korean community (Han, 2020). Many Joseonjok face economic instability due to rural depopulation and limited access to the high-growth sectors dominated by Han Chinese, such as urban industries and technology. In contrast, the Han Chinese, as the majority group, benefit disproportionately from China's economic development, securing greater access to wealth, resources, and political influence (Park, 2003). While Chinese-Koreans often engage in cross-border economic activities with South Korea, which provides some economic mobility, they still face structural challenges within China that limit their socio-economic advancement compared to the Han Chinese majority. This disparity illustrates the complex socio-economic relationship, where Chinese-Koreans navigate both opportunities and constraints in an economy largely shaped by Han dominance.

2.2. Method

In the methodology section of this study, we adopted a survey-based research approach to explore how Chinese-Korean and Chinese individuals navigate their racialized ethnic identities. The survey was administered in three languages—Chinese, English, and Korean—to accommodate the participants' diverse linguistic backgrounds. The participant sample was purposive, selected to

represent individuals who self-identify as either Chinese or Chinese-Korean. The ages of participants ranged from 15 to 61 years old and they are located in different countries such as China, Korea and Singapore, ensuring a broad representation of experiences across different life stages. A total of 44 respondents completed the survey.

The survey consisted of both closed and open-ended questions, designed to capture participants' perceptions of their ethnic identity, experiences of racialization, and how these intersect with socio-cultural and national contexts. Participants were asked about their experiences of belonging, marginalization, and the influence of their ethnic identity on their social and economic opportunities. To ensure clarity, questions were phrased simply and translated accurately in all three languages. The survey was conducted online, providing respondents with the flexibility to complete it at their convenience. All participants gave informed consent prior to participation, and anonymity was maintained throughout the research process.

Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were used to identify patterns in responses, while qualitative content analysis was applied to the open-ended questions to uncover deeper insights into participants' personal experiences of navigating their racialized ethnic identities. Although the survey approach enabled us to collect a diverse range of perspectives, we acknowledge certain limitations, including the relatively small sample size.

2.3. Findings

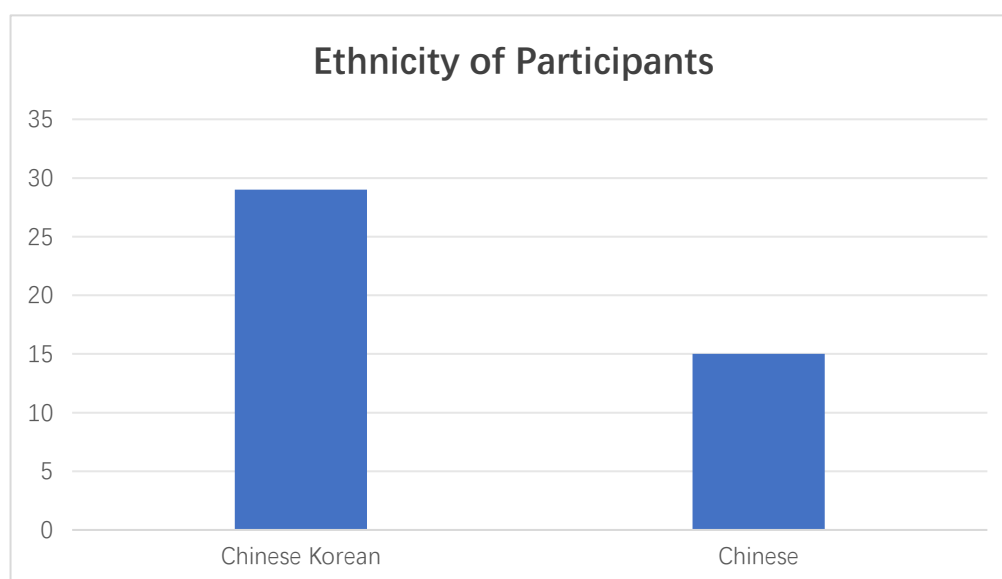


Figure 1. Ethnicity of Participants

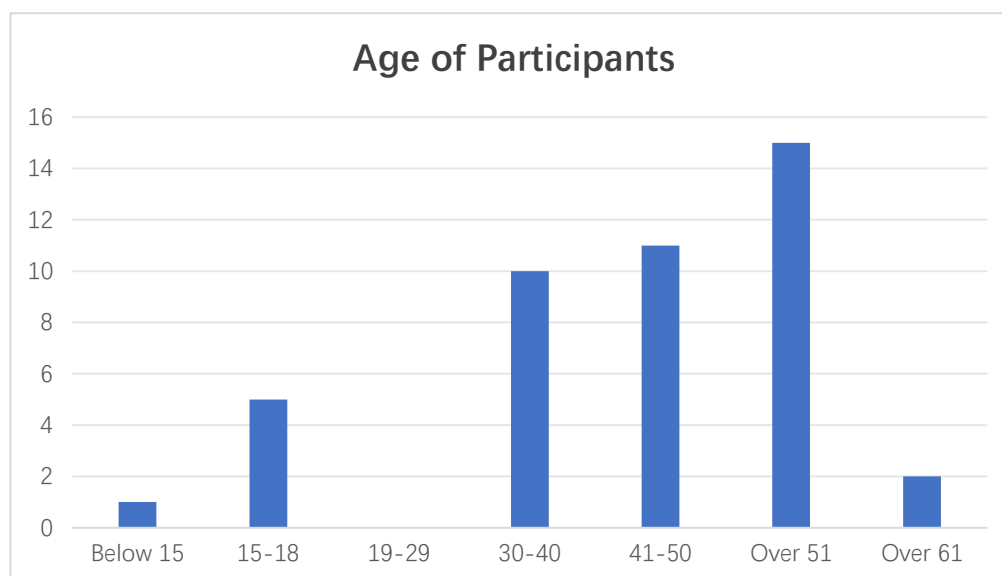


Figure 2. Age of Participants

The survey included 44 participants, with 29 legally identifying as Chinese-Koreans and 15 as Chinese, all of whom hold Chinese nationality. Participants ranged in age, with one individual below 15 years old, five between 15-18, none between 19-29, ten between 30-40, eleven between 41-50, fifteen over 51, and two over 61. Despite their ethnic differences, particularly among Chinese-Koreans, there was a strong sense of national pride, with several participants expressing this sentiment using words like “undoubtedly” and “definitely” when referring to their Chinese identity. However, one Chinese-Korean participant emphasized a sense of responsibility to preserve Korean cultural heritage. Participants were geographically diverse, residing in various regions of China, including Shanghai, Jiangsu, Guangdong, Shandong, Zhejiang, Jilin, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Beijing, and Guizhou, as well as overseas in the United States, Korea, and Singapore. Notably, most respondents indicated that they have spent the majority of their lives in the regions from which they originate.

Among the 29 Chinese-Korean participants, language preference varied. Five participants expressed a preference for using Korean, nine preferred Chinese, and fourteen indicated a preference for using both languages. One participant did not specify a language preference. Notably, respondents who completed the survey in both English and Chinese showed a marked preference for using both languages in daily life. When asked about their social interactions, 27 Chinese-Korean participants reported that they enjoy socializing with people from all backgrounds, reflecting an openness to diverse relationships. However, two participants indicated a preference for socializing primarily with fellow Chinese and Chinese-Koreans, suggesting a more culturally specific social network for a small minority.

Regarding knowledge of Chinese-Korean culture, the majority of Chinese-Korean participants demonstrated a strong familiarity, with 19 rating their knowledge as a 5 and 11 rating it as a 4 on a 5-point scale. Only a small number expressed lesser familiarity, with four rating it as a 3, four as a 2, and six as a 1. This indicates that most Chinese-Koreans have a deep understanding of their cultural customs, etiquette, and living habits, whereas Chinese participants showed limited familiarity. When asked about their knowledge of Han Chinese culture, 13 participants rated their knowledge as a 5, 18 as a 4, 11 as a 3, and two rated it lower. While Chinese-Koreans generally expressed a lesser familiarity with Han culture compared to Han participants, it is noteworthy that Han participants were less confident in their knowledge of their own culture, with most rating their understanding as a 3 or 4. As for knowledge of Korean culture, the responses were more evenly distributed: seven participants rated their familiarity as a 5, nine as a 4, thirteen as a 3, eight as a 2, and seven as a 1. Both Chinese and Chinese-Koreans indicated relatively low familiarity with Korean culture, although older Chinese-Koreans tended to have a stronger knowledge of it, reflecting the generational retention of cultural heritage.

When asked how they behave differently when interacting or socializing with people from different cultures, the majority of participants reported that they do not perceive any significant difference in their behavior. A number of respondents mentioned the practical need to use a different language to facilitate communication, depending on the cultural context. A few participants, however, indicated that they consciously adjust their behavior by being more cautious about cultural and religious differences to avoid offending others or perpetuating stereotypes. This suggests that while most participants view their interactions as culturally neutral, a smaller group is more mindful of the cultural sensitivities involved in cross-cultural interactions.

When asked about the aspects of Chinese-Korean culture that have influenced them the most, older participants frequently highlighted the "spirit of their predecessors," which they interpreted as a spirit of striving and resilience. This sentiment likely reflects the communist influence of North Korea rather than South Korea. In addition to this, many participants emphasized the importance of language and education, with nearly all respondents mentioning the distinctive culture and etiquette that characterize Chinese-Korean traditions. Younger participants, on the other hand, tended to focus more on cultural elements like food, specifically mentioning dishes such as cold noodles. Interestingly, some Han Chinese participants noted that they did not consider certain Korean dishes to be truly "Korean," underscoring a general unfamiliarity with Chinese-Korean culture and a potential misunderstanding of cultural distinctions between Korean and Chinese-Korean identities.

When asked which questions were difficult to answer and why, most participants reported no significant difficulties. However, a few Chinese-Korean participants expressed challenges in answering questions related to their identity. They attributed this difficulty to having lived among Han Chinese for an extended period, which led them to feel somewhat disconnected from or unsure about aspects of their Chinese-Korean identity. This highlights the influence of assimilation and the gradual fading of cultural distinctions for individuals who have spent a significant amount of time immersed in a different cultural context.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data from the survey highlights both a strong sense of national belonging and a growing concern about the cultural identity of Chinese-Koreans, especially in the context of long-term assimilation into the dominant Han Chinese society. Chinese-Koreans have a common theme of national pride emerged. Many Chinese-Korean respondents expressed their Chinese identity with conviction, using words such as "undoubtedly" and "definitely" to affirm their loyalty to the Chinese state. Despite this strong identification with Chinese nationality, there are indications of cultural tensions and identity negotiation, particularly around the preservation of Chinese-Korean heritage. Notably, one participant explicitly mentioned feeling a responsibility to preserve aspects of Korean cultural heritage, signaling a lingering attachment to ethnic identity in the face of national integration.

The language preferences among Chinese-Koreans further reveal the complexities of identity in this group. Of the 29 Chinese-Korean respondents, five indicated a preference for using Korean, nine preferred Chinese, and fourteen stated that they prefer to use both languages. This distribution of language preferences suggests that, while many Chinese-Koreans have adopted the dominant language of the country, a significant number continue to value and use Korean, reflecting a dual linguistic and cultural identity. The preference for both Chinese and Korean among nearly half of the Chinese-Korean participants suggests that bilingualism is one of the key ways through which they negotiate their identities. It also reflects the broader trend of cultural adaptation and integration, where individuals maintain ties to their ethnic heritage while also engaging with the dominant language of the country. Furthermore, respondents who completed the survey in both English and Chinese expressed a preference for using both languages in daily life, which suggests that those living overseas or in multicultural contexts navigate even more complex linguistic landscapes.

The data on social interactions provides additional insight into the ways Chinese-Koreans relate to their identity. The vast majority of Chinese-Korean participants (27 out of 29) reported that they enjoy socializing with people from all backgrounds, reflecting an openness to cross-cultural

relationships. This finding suggests that, for most Chinese-Koreans, ethnicity is not a limiting factor in their social lives, and they are comfortable interacting with a diverse range of people. However, two participants indicated a preference for socializing primarily with fellow Chinese and Chinese-Koreans. This minority perspective points to the fact that, for some, cultural and ethnic commonality plays a more significant role in forming social bonds. These respondents may feel a stronger sense of comfort or shared identity when engaging with people from similar cultural backgrounds, underscoring the importance of cultural retention in their social interactions.

In terms of cultural knowledge, the survey results reveal stark differences between Chinese-Koreans' familiarity with their own culture versus Han Chinese culture. Most Chinese-Korean participants rated their knowledge of Chinese-Korean customs, etiquette, and living habits highly, with 19 rating it as a 5 and 11 rating it as a 4 on a 5-point scale. This suggests that, despite concerns about assimilation, many Chinese-Koreans retain a strong connection to their cultural roots. However, a smaller subset of participants expressed more limited knowledge of their own culture, with four participants rating their familiarity as a 3, four as a 2, and six as a 1. These responses indicate that for some Chinese-Koreans, the connection to their ethnic heritage is weakening, perhaps as a result of living in predominantly Han Chinese regions or due to generational changes.

When asked about their knowledge of Han Chinese culture, the responses reflected a degree of cultural distance. Thirteen participants rated their knowledge of Han culture as a 5, 18 as a 4, and 11 as a 3. This suggests that, while Chinese-Koreans are generally familiar with the customs and practices of the dominant culture, they may not feel as integrated or knowledgeable about it as Han Chinese participants. Interestingly, Han Chinese respondents displayed lower levels of confidence in their own cultural knowledge, with most rating their understanding of Han culture as a 3 or 4. This suggests a broader trend of cultural ambiguity or uncertainty, perhaps reflective of the rapid modernization and shifts in cultural practices within China. For Chinese-Koreans, this cultural gap might reflect the ongoing negotiation between their ethnic identity and the dominant cultural norms of the country in which they live.

The survey also asked participants about their knowledge of Korean culture, which yielded a more diverse range of responses. Seven participants rated their knowledge of Korean culture as a 5, nine as a 4, thirteen as a 3, eight as a 2, and seven as a 1. Both Chinese and Chinese-Koreans demonstrated relatively low familiarity with Korean culture, which may reflect the declining influence of Korean traditions among younger generations or those who have lived predominantly in Chinese-speaking environments. However, older Chinese-Korean participants tended to have a stronger knowledge of Korean culture, reflecting generational differences in cultural retention. This finding highlights the generational transmission of cultural heritage, where older individuals are more likely to retain and pass on traditions, while younger generations may feel more disconnected from these roots. Interestingly, some Han Chinese participants expressed confusion about certain elements of Korean culture, such as food, indicating a broader lack of awareness or understanding of the distinctions between Korean and Chinese-Korean cultural practices.

Another notable finding relates to participants' behavior in cross-cultural interactions. The majority of respondents reported that they do not perceive significant differences in how they behave when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. However, a smaller number of participants indicated that they adjust their behavior depending on the cultural context. Some respondents mentioned the need to use different languages to facilitate communication, while a few expressed that they consciously avoid offending others by being cautious about cultural and religious differences. This heightened cultural sensitivity suggests that, while most Chinese-Koreans view their interactions as culturally neutral, a minority are aware of the potential pitfalls of cross-cultural interactions and are mindful of avoiding stereotypes or misunderstandings.

Finally, the responses to the question about difficult topics revealed some concerns regarding identity among Chinese-Koreans. While most participants reported no significant difficulties in answering the questions, a few Chinese-Korean respondents expressed challenges in responding to identity-related questions. They attributed these difficulties to their long-term immersion in Han

Chinese society, which has caused them to feel somewhat disconnected from their ethnic identity. This sense of disconnection underscores the impact of assimilation on cultural retention, particularly for those who have spent extended periods of time in predominantly Han environments. It suggests that, over time, cultural distinctions between Chinese-Koreans and Han Chinese may fade, raising concerns about the sustainability of Chinese-Korean identity in future generations.

In conclusion, the data from the survey reflects a complex and evolving landscape of Chinese-Korean identity. While national pride and cultural retention remain strong for many, there are clear signs of cultural assimilation and identity negotiation, particularly among those who have spent significant time living in Han Chinese regions or overseas. Language preference, social networks, and cultural knowledge all point to a dynamic process of identity formation in which Chinese-Koreans navigate between their ethnic heritage and the dominant Chinese culture. The challenges expressed by some respondents regarding their identity highlight the growing concern that, over time, cultural distinctions may blur, leading to a loss of cultural specificity for future generations of Chinese-Koreans.

2.5. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex and evolving identity of Chinese-Koreans, who balance strong national pride with concerns about cultural assimilation. While many participants retain a deep connection to their Chinese-Korean heritage, younger generations show signs of losing touch with traditional values and cultural knowledge, particularly regarding Korean customs. Bilingualism and openness to diverse social interactions reflect efforts to navigate between ethnic and national identities. However, long-term immersion in Han Chinese society has led some Chinese-Koreans to feel disconnected from their roots. The findings emphasize the importance of preserving cultural identity amid the pressures of assimilation in a modernizing society.

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