



Negotiating Identity and Political Belonging: Filipino-Chinese Students in Policy-Driven Multicultural Schools

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Since the early 2020s, Chinese schools in the Philippines have implemented coeducational and multicultural curriculum reforms aligning heritage-language education with national Filipinization policies and multicultural-inclusion mandates. However, the effects of these changes on the identity development and emotional well-being of Filipino-Chinese adolescents remain poorly understood.

Methods: This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological design. Twelve Filipino-Chinese students aged 15–18 years were purposively recruited from one Chinese multicultural school. Participants completed semi-structured interviews lasting 20–60 minutes. Data collection continued until thematic saturation, observed at approximately the ninth interview. Transcripts were analyzed using NVivo-supported thematic analysis. Researcher bracketing, or epoché, was maintained throughout to minimize preconceptions concerning Filipino-Chinese identity.

Results: The reforms created opportunities for civic identification and interaction among peers from diverse backgrounds. Nevertheless, participants perceived declining visibility of their heritage language and cultural practices. They negotiated this tension through four adaptive strategies: code-switching across social contexts, selectively engaging with cultural traditions, masking cultural identity when necessary, and distinguishing cultural heritage from political identity. These strategies reflected efforts to balance belonging, acceptance, and cultural continuity within institutional environments.

Conclusion: The study introduces Conditional Cultural Expression, a child-centered concept derived from participants' accounts, describing how minority students regulate the visibility of their cultural identities in response to institutional norms and peer expectations. The findings suggest that multicultural reforms may simultaneously broaden social inclusion and constrain cultural expression. Schools should adopt developmentally responsive, differentiated multicultural and heritage-language policies that recognize adolescents' identity negotiations, protect emotional well-being, and create opportunities for meaningful cultural participation.

Keywords: Multicultural Education Policy; Filipino-Chinese Education; Bicultural Identity; Heritage Language Anxiety; School Belonging; Adolescent Well-being

Introduction

Multicultural education has emerged as a crucial element of educational reform throughout Asia, as societies with growing diversity aim to foster equity, cultural acknowledgment, and democratic engagement via education (Afifuddin et al., 2025; Patras et al., 2022). While multicultural policies aim to enhance inclusion and educational opportunities, their execution does not inherently eradicate structural disparities or alter the institutional circumstances that disadvantage minority students (Kavanagh & Dupont, 2021; Parameswaran et al., 2023). Multicultural programs can validate ethnic identities while also necessitating that minority students adhere to prevailing national standards. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between the official aims of multicultural policy and the manner in which students encounter these policies in their daily educational experiences (Naz et al., 2023; Osler, 2015).

This differentiation is especially pertinent to private Chinese educational institutions in the Philippines. These establishments function as both purveyors of the national curriculum and guardians of the Chinese language and cultural legacy. Their modern educational landscape has been influenced by two intersecting policy frameworks. In this research, Filipinization denotes the nationalization model whereby Chinese educational institutions integrated the Philippine curriculum, employed English and Filipino as the primary languages of teaching, and limited Mandarin instruction to specific subjects or time slots. Multiculturalism, in contrast, pertains to contemporary changes aimed at inclusiveness, such as coeducation, curricula focused on diversity, updated language policies, and a revitalized emphasis on heritage-language and cultural initiatives. Chinese educational institutions are thus anticipated to





adhere to national academic requirements while also showcasing and maintaining their cultural uniqueness. This dual expectation complicates the circumstances of Filipino-Chinese students, who might be culturally integrated into Philippine society yet are nonetheless regarded as distinct or foreign within their own national context (Xu, 2019).

The connection between these policy directions is not inherently synergistic. Filipinization is fundamentally based on national cohesion, while multicultural education focuses on acknowledging cultural diversity within a common educational framework. Scholarly critiques warn that multicultural reforms risk becoming merely symbolic if they incorporate cultural elements without tackling the underlying frameworks that shape belonging, legitimacy, and national identity (Kavanagh & Dupont, 2021; Osler, 2015). An overemphasis or lack of contextualization of cultural categories may exacerbate perceived separations between ethnic and national identities (Mazibuko & Ngidi, 2024). Filipino-Chinese pupils could thus need to prove their Filipino identity while also being tasked with upholding their Chinese history. Instead of addressing issues of identity and belonging, the concurrent application of these rules may render cultural expression progressively contingent and contextually reliant.

This experience can be comprehended in part through studies on bicultural identity formation. Bicultural identity integration pertains to how individuals view their cultural identities as harmonious rather than conflicting (Huynh et al., 2011). Enhanced congruence among cultural identities is typically linked to improved adaptation, self-worth, resilience, and sense of belonging (Chen et al., 2022; Safa et al., 2023). Nonetheless, identity negotiation is not just an internal or fixed psychological phenomenon. Bicultural adolescents might modify their language, conduct, and cultural identity display in reaction to evolving social norms (Purpuri et al., 2024). Heritage-language competency can serve not just as an educational asset but also as a marker of cultural legitimacy, possibly inducing stress in youth who feel they fall short of their heritage community's standards (Van Gorp & Verheyen, 2024). Conflicts about identity can similarly influence students' self-worth and academic involvement when their ethnic self-concept is viewed as incongruent with prevailing ideals of the exemplary student or citizen (Debrosse et al., 2018).

The geopolitical dynamics between the Philippines and China introduce an additional layer to this negotiation. Public controversies about the West Philippine Sea and the wider Philippine-China relations can amplify issues of national allegiance for Filipino-Chinese youth. Under these conditions, cultural indicators including last names, educational institution ties, physical appearance, and proficiency in Mandarin may take on political significance in peer and classroom dynamics. Studies indicate that both overt discrimination and nuanced social ostracism can jeopardize ethnic-minority students' feelings of belonging and academic involvement (Juvonen et al., 2019; Verkuyten et al., 2019). This holds particular importance for Chinese-Filipino adolescents, whose experiences have been characterized as a "diaspora at home": they may find themselves socially and culturally embedded in the Philippines yet politically perceived as outsiders (Xu, 2019). Their sense of belonging may thus depend on continual displays of national identity, aligning with Yodovich's (2021) notion of conditional belonging.

Current academic research focuses on the individual elements of this issue but seldom investigates their interrelation. Investigations into multicultural education elucidate the impact of curriculum, institutional methodologies, and student interactions on participation and inclusivity (Abacioglu et al., 2023; Naz et al., 2023). Research on bicultural identification elucidates how teenagers from minority and immigrant backgrounds navigate or manage their diverse cultural connections (Safa et al., 2023; Schmidt et al., 2023). Simultaneously, studies on school belonging reveal the influence of acceptance, supportive connections, discrimination, and exclusion on kids' adaptation (Gharaei et al., 2024; Plenty & Jonsson, 2017). Nonetheless, these bodies of literature inadequately elucidate the manner in which Filipino-Chinese students navigate multicultural reforms that are placed onto a pre-existing nationalizing framework or how geopolitical tensions infiltrate their daily debates of school identity.

Rectifying this deficiency is crucial, as formal metrics like enrollment figures, adherence to curricula, and availability of cultural initiatives do not adequately disclose the extent of students' genuine inclusion. This study focuses on the viewpoints of 12 Filipino-Chinese teenagers to analyze the interpretation and negotiation of Filipinization and multicultural education within daily school





environments. It examines the influence of these regulations on students' cultural identities and their perceptions of social and political inclusion, along with the methods they employ to manage cultural expression in various contexts. The research promotes the child-centered notion of Conditional Cultural Expression, which outlines the adaptive mechanism by which students render specific aspects of their cultural identities apparent, subdued, or negotiable in relation to institutional demands, peer dynamics, community heritage norms, and the wider geopolitical context.

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine how Filipino-Chinese students — used consistently throughout as the specific population of interest, with "bicultural students" reserved for the broader category to which they belong — make sense of their learning experiences within multicultural school environments shaped by institutional and policy reform. Specifically, the study aims to:

Explore how Filipino-Chinese students perceive and interpret multicultural education and Filipinization policies as enacted in everyday school and learning contexts.

Investigate how these policies shape students' identity development and sense of inclusion and belonging within the school community, distinguishing, where relevant, between social belonging and political belonging.

Analyze the strategies Filipino-Chinese students employ to adapt their cultural expression and participation in learning activities in response to institutional expectations, peer dynamics, and the broader geopolitical climate.

Examine what Filipino-Chinese students themselves perceive to be the implications of their adaptive strategies for their ongoing engagement with school, heritage community, and national identity.

Literature review

This review synthesizes, rather than merely summarizes, three bodies of scholarship — multicultural education policy, bicultural identity development, and school belonging — and closes with a synthesis that identifies where these literatures converge, diverge, and leave the specific experience of Filipino-Chinese students unaddressed.

Multicultural Education Policies and Their Impact

Multicultural education policies are widely framed as instruments for fostering equality and inclusivity in increasingly diverse classrooms, promoting cultural awareness, respect for diversity, and equal access (Naz et al., 2023). Yet a substantial critical literature argues that such policies, however well-intentioned, frequently fail to address the structural inequalities and institutional racism that produce unequal outcomes in the first place (Parameswaran et al., 2023; Kavanagh & Dupont, 2021). Kavanagh and Dupont (2021) contend that multicultural reforms can overemphasize identity affirmation and cultural content while leaving systemic forces largely untouched, at times reducing culture to a static, celebratory display rather than treating it as dynamic and lived. Mazibuko and Ngidi (2024) add a further complication: an overemphasis on multiculturalism can itself generate identity politics, in which students come to prioritize ethnic-group identity over national identity — a concern with direct relevance to the Filipinization framework described above. Read together, these critiques converge on a single insight that this study extends to a new setting: multicultural policy's stated intentions and its lived, structural effects are not the same thing, and the gap between them is precisely where students' adaptive labor takes place.

What this literature does not yet do is examine that gap inside the historically unique institutional form of the Philippine Chinese school, where the "multicultural" curriculum being added is layered onto a much older nationalist mandate rather than introduced into a neutral policy environment. Osler (2015) notes that in many national contexts, multicultural education is framed explicitly around justice for minority groups within the nation-state, typically through curriculum change or teacher attitudes rather than structural reform — a description that maps closely onto the Filipino-Chinese case, where reform efforts have concentrated on curriculum and coeducation rather than on the deeper structural question of how heritage-language instruction is valued and resourced.





The Philippine Chinese school occupies an unusual position within this broader literature precisely because it is neither a mainstream public school absorbing a minority population, nor a fully autonomous heritage-language institution operating outside state oversight. It is a hybrid: an institution founded by and for an ethnic-Chinese community, historically required by Filipinization-era regulation to adopt the national curriculum, and now further required to adopt multicultural and coeducational reform on top of that earlier nationalist layer. General multicultural-education literature, developed largely in Western contexts where the reform question is how a majority-run public system accommodates a minority population, does not straightforwardly transfer to a setting where the minority institution is itself the site of reform, and where the "majority" curriculum being added was historically experienced by the community as an instrument of assimilation rather than inclusion. This layering of policy histories — assimilationist Filipinization followed by inclusion-oriented multiculturalism — helps explain why reforms intended to signal inclusion can, from inside the institution, register instead as a second wave of pressure to conform, a dynamic this study's findings substantiate directly.

Identity Development and Negotiation in Bicultural Youth

Identity formation during adolescence is shaped by family, peers, education, and social context (Ye, 2024). For ethnoracially minoritized and immigrant-origin youth, this process involves integrating identities derived from ethnic-group membership with identities tied to the society in which they live (Safa et al., 2023). Bicultural identity integration (BII) models assess the degree to which individuals experience their multiple cultural identities as compatible rather than conflicting, with higher integration generally associated with better psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Huynh et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2022). Berry's bidimensional acculturation model similarly frames adaptation along two axes — heritage-culture maintenance and destination-culture adoption — yielding integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization strategies, with integration typically associated with the most favorable outcomes (Crocetti et al., 2025). Both models, however, largely treat identity management as a relatively stable individual disposition rather than a context-dependent performance that shifts hour to hour across a school day; students may instead rely on situational strategies such as code-switching, buffering, bridging, or passing to manage identity display as contexts change (Purpuri et al., 2024). This distinction — between identity as a stable integration outcome and identity as a moment-to-moment regulatory performance — is central to the theoretical contribution this study develops below.

A related strand of research examines the specific psychological cost of this negotiation: conflicts between an adolescent's ethnic self-concept and an internalized "ideal self" shaped by majority-culture expectations can impede academic engagement and self-esteem among ethnic-minority students (Debrosse et al., 2018). Heritage-language anxiety research adds a further, more targeted dimension: adolescents who feel obligated to demonstrate proficiency in a heritage language they were not consistently raised speaking at home can experience this expectation as a distinct form of anxiety, tied to fear of judgment from co-ethnic peers rather than from outgroup members (Van Gorp & Verheyen, 2024). This anticipates the language-related findings reported below, where Mandarin proficiency functioned less as a neutral skill than as a social marker of belonging within the Filipino-Chinese community itself.

The Concept of Belonging in Educational Contexts: Social and Political Dimensions

School belonging refers to the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported within the school environment, and is closely tied to bicultural identity integration and academic resilience (Chen et al., 2022; Gharaei et al., 2024). Positive school climate and supportive teacher and peer relationships are consistently identified as predictors of belonging (Gharaei et al., 2024), while social exclusion — even in its milder, non-victimization forms — can undermine adolescent well-being and school adjustment (Juvonen et al., 2019; Plenty & Jonsson, 2017). Explicit ethnic bias and subtler forms of exclusion alike can threaten ethnic-racial identity and compromise the social-identity needs of belongingness and esteem (Verkuyten et al., 2019), suggesting that inclusion is frequently experienced conditionally, contingent on conformity to dominant norms (Marks & Garcia Coll, 2018).

This literature on social belonging, however, largely leaves untheorized a second, distinct dimension that emerges as central to the Filipino-Chinese case: political belonging, or the degree to





which a student is recognized — by peers, institutions, and the state — as a legitimate national citizen, independent of cultural heritage. Yodovich's (2021) concept of conditional belonging captures part of this distinction, describing acceptance that depends on continual performance of legitimacy rather than being unconditionally granted. For Filipino-Chinese students, social belonging (being liked, included in friendship groups) and political belonging (being recognized as authentically Filipino, not suspected of divided loyalty) can be gained, lost, and negotiated somewhat independently of one another, particularly as geopolitical tension makes political belonging newly salient in ways that ordinary peer-inclusion research does not anticipate. Xu's (2019) account of Chinese-Filipino youth as a "diaspora at home" is the clearest existing articulation of this dynamic, describing how these students may be culturally at home yet politically marked as foreign even while holding Philippine citizenship and having no lived connection to mainland China.

Synthesis and Theoretical Foundations

Read together, these three literatures are complementary but incomplete when applied to the present case. Multicultural-policy scholarship explains the institutional mechanisms — curriculum change, language policy, coeducation — through which schools attempt inclusion, but it treats "inclusion" as a policy outcome rather than a lived, contested experience. Bicultural-identity scholarship explains how individuals internally reconcile multiple cultural identities, but largely as a psychological trait rather than a situational, institutionally shaped performance. Belonging scholarship explains the social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion but has not systematically distinguished social from political belonging, a distinction that becomes analytically necessary once geopolitical context is taken seriously. This study integrates all three: it uses multicultural-policy theory to situate the institutional reforms Filipino-Chinese students are navigating; it uses bicultural-identity theory, particularly the situational-strategy variant, to interpret how students manage cultural display; and it uses a belonging framework that separates social from political belonging to interpret students' accounts of inclusion, exclusion, and "diaspora at home" positioning. Where existing theory falls short — in explaining why students regulate cultural visibility differently across contexts rather than settling into a single stable integration strategy — this study proposes Conditional Cultural Expression as a grounded, emergent concept, developed fully in the Discussion.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) models Filipino-Chinese students' experiences as shaped by a system that is hierarchical in origin but recursive in operation, moving from broad governmental mandate to individual outcome and back again.



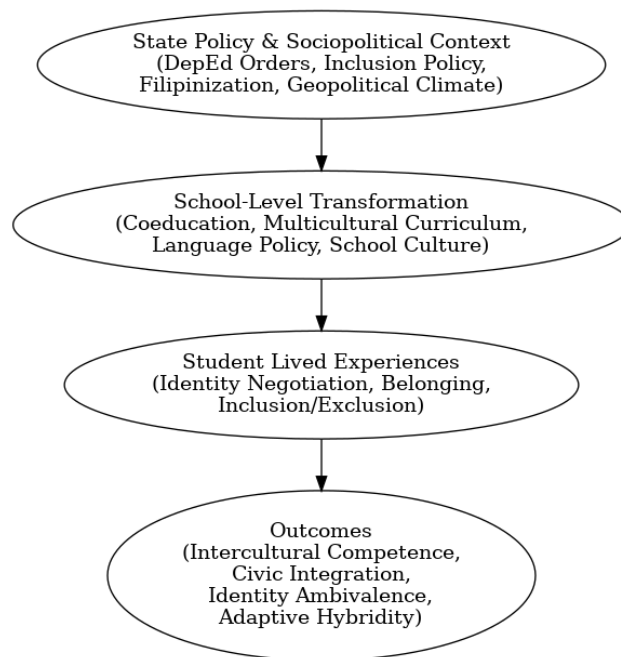


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of Filipino-Chinese students' lived experiences in policy-driven multicultural schooling

The framework is structured as follows:

State Policy and Sociopolitical Context. This layer encompasses government directives — DepEd orders, national-integration policy, and Filipinization initiatives — together with the prevailing geopolitical climate surrounding Philippine-China relations, which affects how Filipino-Chinese identity is perceived and treated at the school level (Patras et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2025; Afifuddin et al., 2025).

School-Level Transformation. Directly shaped by state policy, this layer represents operational change within Chinese schools: coeducation, multicultural-curriculum integration, and revised language allocations that continue to position Mandarin and Hokkien alongside Filipino and English (Abacioglu et al., 2023; Naz et al., 2023).

Student Lived Experiences. This central layer captures students' active identity negotiation — how they integrate Filipino and Chinese cultural identities — and their sense of belonging, disaggregated in this study into social belonging (peer acceptance) and political belonging (recognition as legitimately Filipino) (Gharaei et al., 2024; Xu, 2019).

Outcomes. The final layer includes intercultural competence, civic integration, identity ambivalence, and adaptive hybridity (Huynh et al., 2011; Schmidt et al., 2023).

To reduce the risk of the framework functioning as loosely evocative language, each central construct is defined operationally for this study. Identity negotiation refers to the observable, situational adjustment of self-presentation (language choice, cultural disclosure, self-labeling) across settings. Social belonging refers to a student's sense of peer acceptance and interpersonal inclusion, independent of national or political recognition. Political belonging refers to a student's sense of being recognized by peers and institutions as a legitimate Filipino citizen, independent of cultural heritage or cultural visibility. Symbolic multiculturalism refers to cultural recognition that is confined to sanctioned, celebratory occasions rather than embedded in routine practice. Emotional strain refers to the affective cost — reported directly by participants as fatigue, anxiety, or self-monitoring — associated with managing these other constructs simultaneously. Adaptive strategy refers to the specific, nameable behavior (code-switching, selective engagement, cultural masking, separation of cultural and political identity) a student uses to manage that strain. These operational definitions were used directly as sensitizing concepts during coding and structured the presentation of the Results.



Two revisions to the original linear model are warranted by the data and are incorporated here. First, the geopolitical-climate construct at the top layer is not merely background: participants' accounts show it entering the school directly, through peer remarks and political stereotyping, making it a salient and analyzable feature of the Results rather than a distal contextual variable. Second, the framework's arrows should not be read as strictly top-down. Several participants described peer culture and their own adaptive strategies as, over time, reshaping how teachers and classmates treated cultural difference in the classroom — a bottom-up, recursive influence in which lived experience feeds back into school-level culture rather than being solely produced by it. The framework is therefore best understood as a system with feedback loops rather than a one-directional pipeline from policy to outcome.

Methodology

This section delineates the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis strategies employed in this study. It outlines the ethical considerations that guided the research process to ensure the well-being and rights of the participants.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological design to explore Filipino-Chinese students' lived experience of identity negotiation, inclusion, and political belonging within policy-driven multicultural schooling. Descriptive phenomenology, rather than interpretative phenomenological analysis, was selected because the study aimed to describe the structure of a shared experience across a purposive group of adolescents rather than to produce idiographic case analyses of a small number of individuals (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Consistent with phenomenological practice, the research team engaged in bracketing (*epoché*) throughout data collection and analysis: researchers documented their own prior assumptions about Filipino-Chinese identity and Chinese-school culture in reflexive memos before data collection began, revisited these memos during coding to check whether provisional codes were being shaped by those assumptions rather than by participants' own language, and used regular team debriefs to surface and set aside interpretations not directly supported by the transcripts. Bracketing was treated as an ongoing discipline rather than a one-time declaration, given the researchers' own proximity to the Filipino-Chinese community.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling from one Chinese-multicultural school in North Luzon that had implemented multicultural and coeducational reforms within the preceding five years. Because the study draws on a single institution, its findings describe that school's particular implementation of reform in depth rather than variation across institutions; this single-site scope is treated as a limitation and addressed further below.

A total of twelve junior and senior high school students, aged 15 to 18 years, participated. Eligibility required that a participant self-identify as having Chinese heritage through at least one parent and be currently enrolled in the participating school; students of full Filipino-Chinese heritage and students of mixed Filipino-Chinese heritage were both eligible and were analyzed both together, to identify shared themes, and disaggregated where a meaningful difference emerged, most notably in the language-burden theme reported below. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics.

Table 1. Profile of Study Participants (N = 12)

Characteristic	Description
Age range	15–18 years
Educational level	Junior and Senior High School
Gender	Male and female students
Heritage background	Full Filipino-Chinese (n = 8) and mixed Filipino-Chinese heritage (n = 4)





Characteristic	Description
School type	One Chinese-multicultural school in North Luzon undergoing multicultural and coeducational reform
Primary languages used	English, Filipino; varying exposure to Mandarin and Hokkien
Cultural engagement	Ranging from high to limited participation in Chinese cultural practices

Note: All participants were anonymized, and no identifying personal or school-specific information is reported to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 20 to 60 minutes, conducted in English or Filipino according to participant preference, with contextual switching to other languages where participants introduced them spontaneously; where Mandarin or Hokkien terms were used, these were transcribed and translated by a bilingual research-team member and checked against the audio by a second team member to guard against translation drift. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized using pseudonyms. The interview protocol covered five domains: self-identification and perceptions of ethnic and national identity; language use at home and school; experiences of inclusion and exclusion; emotional responses to academic and cultural expectations; and perceptions of school policy and multicultural practice, with follow-up probes used to elicit concrete examples rather than general statements. A sample identity-domain probe asked participants to describe a specific recent moment when they felt especially Chinese or especially Filipino, an episodic prompt chosen over abstract questions that pilot interviews suggested elicited rehearsed rather than reflective answers; language-domain probes similarly asked for a specific classroom moment involving Mandarin or Hokkien rather than a general proficiency rating.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed an iterative model of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and refinement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Robinson & Williams, 2024). Two researchers independently coded the first four transcripts, compared codes, and resolved discrepancies through discussion to establish a shared codebook; one researcher then coded the remaining transcripts, with the second researcher auditing a 25 percent random sample for consistency. NVivo software was used to organize codes and manage case-based comparison across participants (Zhang et al., 2024). Data collection continued until thematic saturation — operationalized as three consecutive interviews producing no new codes at the level of theme, rather than sub-code — was judged to have been reached, at approximately the ninth participant; the remaining three interviews were retained as an additional check on saturation rather than because new themes were anticipated. Emphasis was placed on the number of participants expressing a given theme rather than raw code frequency, to preserve narrative depth while indicating prevalence.

Ethical Considerations

Because participants were minors, ethical review board approval was obtained before data collection, and both parental consent and student assent were secured. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and all data were anonymized and stored securely. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity to participants' emotional well-being: questions were framed to avoid distress, and participants were not required to answer questions they found uncomfortable. A specific protocol was in place in which any participant who appeared distressed during a question about identity or exclusion was offered a pause, given the option to skip the topic, and, where distress persisted, referred to the school guidance counselor with parental notification. No participant required this referral during data collection, but the protocol was treated as a standing requirement of the study design given the sensitivity of the topics involved.





Results

This section presents findings from interviews with twelve Filipino-Chinese students. Five interrelated themes were identified: identity negotiation, language as resource and burden, cultural practice, conditional inclusion and belonging, and emotional impact and adaptation. Frequencies indicate the number of participants expressing a theme, consistent with qualitative case-based reporting.

Table 2. Overview of Major Themes and Case Frequencies (N = 12)

Theme	Description	Cases (n)
Identity negotiation	Contextual and situational identity formation	12
Language as resource and burden	Heritage and dominant language dynamics	11
Cultural practice	Symbolic versus lived cultural engagement	10
Inclusion and belonging	Conditional peer and school acceptance	10
Emotional impact and adaptation	Emotional responses and coping strategies	9

Identity as Contextual and Negotiated

All participants described identity as fluid rather than fixed. Rather than experiencing this fluidity as confusion, many participants described it as a form of competence — a skill they had developed rather than a deficit they carried. As one student put it, "I know how to be the right amount of Chinese depending on where I am. That's not confusing, it's just something I got good at" (R9). This framing recasts what earlier literature often labels "identity ambiguity" as, for a substantial subset of participants, a source of agency: four of the twelve participants described their mixed or ambiguous identity position in explicitly positive, capability-oriented terms rather than as unresolved conflict.

Table 3. Patterns of Ethnic Self-Identification

Identity orientation	Cases (n)
Chinese	5
Filipino	4
Filipino-Chinese / mixed	3
Identity ambiguity (framed as adaptive competence by 4 of these)	4

Identity negotiation intensified in institutional contexts that implicitly demanded cultural clarity, such as Chinese-language classes or cultural performances, where students reported heightened self-consciousness about being perceived as "not Chinese enough." Tension arose not from fluidity itself but from moments when institutional expectations conflicted with students' lived, situational sense of who they were. One participant described this tension directly: "The school wants me to prove I'm Chinese during the Chinese subjects, and prove I'm Filipino during everything else. Nobody just lets me be both at the same time" (R12). This account illustrates why identity ambiguity, for many participants, was less a psychological state to be resolved than a response to an institutional structure that itself demanded sequential, single-category performance rather than allowing simultaneous, integrated expression.

Language as Both Resource and Burden

Language was the most emotionally salient theme. Mandarin, and to a lesser extent Hokkien, were widely perceived as markers of cultural authenticity, while English and Filipino functioned as languages of social integration and academic ease.





Table 4. Language Use and Perceived Impact

Language experience	Cases (n)
Exposure to Mandarin	9
Exposure to Hokkien	7
Dominant use of English/Filipino	10
Perceived language difficulty or loss	6

Students with higher Mandarin proficiency reported confidence in language classes; those with limited proficiency — disproportionately students from mixed-heritage households, three of four of whom described Mandarin instruction as a source of anxiety compared with two of eight full-heritage students — described fear of public mistakes and comparison with peers. "Everyone expects you to already know it. When you don't, it feels embarrassing," one participant explained (R4). This finding is significant beyond an individual-adjustment issue: it points to a structural mismatch between a single Mandarin curriculum track and a genuinely heterogeneous student population, suggesting that "one-size-fits-all" heritage-language policy may itself be producing part of the anxiety it is meant to prevent, rather than simply reflecting individual variation in aptitude.

Cultural Practice as Symbolic Rather Than Lived

Most participants engaged in Chinese cultural practices, but engagement was largely event-based rather than embedded in daily school life.

Table 5. Engagement in Cultural Practices

Cultural practice	Cases (n)
Festival participation	10
Food-related practices	8
Ancestral rituals	5
Selective or declining practice	7

"We wear costumes and dance, but after that, it's back to normal school life," one student observed (R5). Food emerged as the most accessible and emotionally neutral cultural marker; ancestral rituals were less common and concentrated among full-heritage families, with several participants noting a generational decline they attributed to changing family dynamics and reduced institutional emphasis. A smaller number of participants — three of the ten who engaged in cultural practices — described actively declining opportunities to participate in cultural events, most often citing embarrassment or a wish not to be singled out in front of Filipino classmates: "I used to join the lion dance practice, but I stopped because people would film it and post it like it was a show, like we were the entertainment," one participant explained (R7). This account complicates a purely celebratory reading of cultural-festival participation, suggesting that even the most visible and ostensibly well-received form of cultural inclusion can, for some students, register as objectification rather than recognition.

Conditional Inclusion and Peer Belonging

Nineteen students reported feeling generally included, but inclusion was frequently conditional on conformity to dominant linguistic and cultural norms.

Table 6. Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion

Experience	Cases (n)
Feeling included	10





Experience	Cases (n)
Experiencing exclusion	8
Racialized jokes or stereotypes	5
Political stereotyping	4

Students fluent in Filipino or English and familiar with mainstream norms reported smoother integration; those perceived as more visibly Chinese reported greater social distance. "Sometimes they joke about China, and they ask me which side I'm on. It makes me uncomfortable," one participant recalled (R4). Exclusion of this kind was rarely framed by students as overt discrimination; it was subtle, often disguised as humor, and required ongoing self-monitoring.

Emotional Impact of Dual Expectations

Table 7. Emotional Responses to School Experiences

Emotional response	Cases (n)
Pride	8
Confusion	5
Isolation	4
Burnout or exhaustion	3

"You're trying to do well in school and still be Chinese enough. It gets tiring," one student explained (R1). Emotional strain was most pronounced among students in demanding Chinese-language tracks, yet participants rarely described their experience as rejection, emphasizing adjustment and endurance instead. A smaller subgroup of three participants described this endurance in terms closer to exhaustion than resilience, using language such as "tired all the time" or "I just want one place where I don't have to think about it" (R4); the recurrence of exhaustion-specific language across independent interviews suggests that the cumulative emotional cost of identity management deserves closer, more systematic attention rather than being absorbed into the broader category of resilience.

Adaptive Strategies and Identity Management

Table 8. Adaptive Strategies Employed by Students

Strategy	Cases (n)
Code-switching	8
Selective cultural engagement	7
Cultural masking	5
Separation of cultural and political identity	9

The most widely reported strategy — separating cultural affiliation from political identity — was used by nine of twelve participants. Many expressed strong identification as Filipino citizens while maintaining symbolic ties to Chinese heritage, a strategy that appeared somewhat more common among older participants (17–18 years) and among students with lower Mandarin proficiency, though the sample is too small to treat this pattern as more than suggestive. These strategies supported emotional





well-being in the short term but also reinforced the largely symbolic status of cultural engagement within the school environment.

Summary of Findings

Filipino-Chinese students experience policy-driven multicultural schooling as simultaneously enabling and constraining. Identity is actively negotiated rather than simply held; language functions as both asset and burden; cultural practice is often symbolic rather than lived; and inclusion, while common, remains conditional. Students respond through a describable set of adaptive strategies that balance heritage affiliation against civic belonging during a critical developmental period.

Discussion

Identity as Contextual and Educationally Mediated

The results suggest that Filipino-Chinese students perceive identity not as a static classification but as a contextually mediated representation of self. Participants modified their self-presentation in home, school, and peer contexts, viewing these alterations as pragmatic adaptations to varying social expectations rather than as indicators of identity ambiguity. One participant articulated, "When I am at home, I perceive myself as more Chinese. In an academic setting, I exhibit more Filipino traits as that is what others comprehend. This framework endorses contextual methodologies for bicultural identity, acknowledging that bicultural persons might modify their language, conduct, and cultural expression according to their surrounding social context (Purpuri et al., 2024).

These results broaden traditional frameworks of bicultural identity integration. These models typically emphasize the degree to which individuals view their cultural identities as harmonious or discordant (Huynh et al., 2011). While this viewpoint elucidates participants' general impressions of their Filipino and Chinese identities, it fails to adequately address the swift transformations in cultural expression that transpired across various contexts. Participants might perceive their identities as generally congruent while simultaneously highlighting, obscuring, or altering certain facets of those identities in reaction to particular audiences and institutional demands.

The process of identity negotiation became especially challenging when educational activities seemed to necessitate a distinctly and culturally "genuine" identity. Mandarin courses, cultural exhibitions, and heritage-focused activities occasionally placed students in opposition to an idealized conception of Chineseness with which they did not quite resonate. This posed particular challenges for pupils from diverse backgrounds or mostly Filipino-speaking families. The results align with studies indicating that differences between a person's ethnic self-perception and societal norms can lead to identity discord and adversely impact self-worth and academic involvement (Debrosse et al., 2018). Consequently, the primary challenge lay not in embodying both Filipino and Chinese identities, but in the expectation to manifest any ethnicity in a culturally acknowledged and institutionally sanctioned way.

Language Learning as Opportunity and Stressor

Language developed as a means for cultural preservation and a catalyst for academic stress. Participants regarded Mandarin and Hokkien as symbols of Chinese ethnicity and as valuable tools for interaction with family and community members. Nevertheless, structured Mandarin education often induced anxiety, especially in students with minimal previous experience with the language or those from linguistically diverse families. English and Filipino served as the primary languages for academic engagement, peer collaboration, and social assimilation.

This strain illustrates the emotionally intricate status of heritage languages within multilingual education. Heritage-language education can enhance cultural continuity, but it may also induce sentiments of inferiority when language proficiency is regarded as a measure of cultural legitimacy. Van Gorp and Verheyen (2024) similarly discovered that students can encounter mixed feelings when obligated to utilize heritage languages during educational tasks. In this study, Mandarin transcended its role as a mere academic subject, serving instead as a significant social marker for assessing students' affiliation with the Filipino-Chinese community.

The results indicate that implementing a standardized Mandarin curriculum for a diverse linguistic student body could unintentionally perpetuate inequity. Pupils with significant familial or communal exposure to Mandarin commenced their education with a distinct advantage, while those





from mixed-heritage or non-Mandarin-speaking backgrounds faced the potential of being perceived as culturally lacking. Such comparisons could jeopardize the inclusiveness that multicultural and heritage-language initiatives aim to foster. This analysis aligns with studies indicating that educational policies might endorse cultural diversity symbolically, yet neglect to tackle the inequitable circumstances affecting students' engagement in culturally relevant learning experiences (Kavanagh & Dupont, 2021; Parameswaran et al., 2023).

A more inclusive methodology would acknowledge the diversity in individuals' linguistic histories instead of presuming that all Filipino-Chinese pupils had identical Mandarin ability. Tailored training, various access pathways, and a focus on linguistic advancement instead of cultural authenticity may alleviate anxiety while maintaining the cultural significance of heritage-language education. From this viewpoint, the issue lies not in the teaching of Mandarin but in the institutional presumption that ethnic heritage should inherently align with language proficiency.

Cultural Practice and Symbolic Multiculturalism

Participants' narratives indicate that Chinese culture was predominantly evident during festivals, performances, costume-related activities, and other specific school events. These events offered chances for cultural acknowledgment; yet, they frequently lacked integration with standard classroom activities and students' daily lives. As a result, multiculturalism was occasionally perceived as intermittent rather than a continuous paradigm influencing curriculum, relationships, and institutional choices.

This pattern illustrates criticisms of multicultural education that differentiate between symbolic cultural representation and structural inclusion. Multicultural programs might enhance the prominence of minority cultures without significantly altering the institutional frameworks governing educational knowledge, engagement, and inclusion (Kavanagh & Dupont, 2021; Osler, 2015). When cultural variety is mostly showcased through festivities, cuisine, attire, and performances, there is a danger that culture may be perceived as unchanging and ornamental instead of a vibrant aspect of students' daily experiences.

The results additionally indicate that cultural visibility was not equally seen as validation. While several students appreciated school festivities honoring Chinese ancestry, others perceived cultural performances as obligatory demonstrations of an identity they were not consistently ready or inclined to embody. In these situations, acknowledgment transformed into a means of visibility. Learners were acknowledged as constituents of a cultural collective without being afforded authority over the depiction of that culture or their association with it.

Symbolic multiculturalism may consequently possess two interconnected constraints. Initially, it might enable educational institutions to exhibit official acknowledgment of diversity while maintaining the prevailing curricular and language frameworks. Secondly, it has the potential to convert minority students into cultural ambassadors for a wider audience. This does not imply that cultural events are intrinsically exclusive. Their inclusive worth hinges on the extent of students' meaningful agency, the acknowledgment of varied experiences within the cultural group, and the integration of cultural inclusion into everyday school life rather than merely during sporadic celebrations. Multicultural education studies highlight that merely incorporating cultural information is inadequate if students' interactions and daily chances for engagement are unequal (Abacioglu et al., 2023; Naz et al., 2023).

Conditional Inclusion and Peer Belonging

The majority of individuals characterized themselves as broadly embraced within their educational environments. Nonetheless, their narratives indicated that inclusion might hinge on linguistic proficiency, cultural adherence, and the capacity to answer inquiries on nationality and political allegiance. Exclusion was infrequently characterized as overt or prolonged discrimination. Conversely, it frequently manifested through humor, clichés, mockery, or politically sensitive comments. A participant remarked, "Occasionally, they make jokes about China and inquire about my allegiance." It induces discomfort in me" (R4).

The seemingly comedic nature of these exchanges should not mask their possible repercussions. Nuanced social ostracism can diminish adolescents' feelings of inclusion, even if it does not conform to traditional criteria of bullying or explicit victimization (Juvonen et al., 2019; Plenty & Jonsson, 2017). In a comparable manner, social-identity challenges might arise from persistent indications that an ethnic-minority student is perceived as less legitimate, less trustworthy, or less representative of the





national group (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Participants' hesitance to categorize these experiences as discrimination may indicate the normalization of nationality-oriented comedy or their inclination to preserve amicable peer connections.

These results further underscore the need to differentiate social membership from political affiliation. A student may be welcomed as a buddy and peer yet still be required to demonstrate their genuine Filipino identity or justify the activities of the Chinese government. Social acceptance did not inherently guarantee unqualified acknowledgment as a national citizen. This pattern aligns with Yodovich's (2021) notion of conditional belonging, wherein acceptance is contingent upon the sustained demonstration of legitimacy.

The results further elaborate on Xu's (2019) depiction of Chinese-Filipino adolescents as a "diaspora at home." Participants were not inherently socially isolated or culturally disconnected from the Philippines. Conversely, they were sometimes regarded as politically foreign to a nation they perceived as their homeland. Their sense of belonging was thus contingent not just on social inclusion but also on their capacity to distinguish Chinese cultural legacy from notions of political allegiance.

Emotional Labor, Resilience, and Adaptive Strategies

The process of identity negotiation for participants entailed significant emotional effort. They articulated a sense of pride in their Chinese ancestry and Filipino national identity, although they also conveyed exhaustion stemming from the necessity to meet academic standards while exhibiting suitable cultural proficiency. One person remarked, "You are striving to excel academically while maintaining your Chinese identity." It becomes exhausting" (R1). These experiences demonstrate the convergence of cultural and educational expectations, rendering identity maintenance an extra labor within the academic setting.

Instead of outright rejecting any identity, participants predominantly highlighted adaptation, resilience, and calculated self-representation. Their tactics encompassed code-switching, selective engagement in cultural events, downplaying specific identification indicators, and adjusting cultural expression based on the audience. These actions align with findings suggesting that bicultural persons could employ contextual tactics to navigate the prominence and interpretation of their identities in various social environments (Purpuri et al., 2024). While these tactics exhibit flexibility, they need not be regarded solely as indicators of endurance. Ongoing adaptation may incur psychological and educational expenses as students must consistently assess the acceptability of their language or conduct. A notably important tactic involved the dissociation of cultural legacy from political identification. Participants preserved their Chinese cultural connections while unequivocally asserting a Filipino civic and national identity. They dismissed the notion that having Chinese heritage necessitated a political affiliation with the People's Republic of China. This approach amplifies Xu's (2019) analysis of Chinese-Filipino adolescents by illustrating how participants engaged with the political aspects of their marginalized status.

Delineating cultural from political identification allowed participants to preserve their heritage connections without perceiving national affiliation as a mutually exclusive option. It also uncovered a constraint in institutional and peer perceptions of bicultural identity: cultural heritage, ethnicity, citizenship, and geopolitical allegiance were frequently conflated into one category. The adaptive reactions of participants facilitated the differentiation of these categories, enabling them to affirm Filipino citizenship while maintaining ties to Chinese family, language, and culture. This type of adaptation may enhance immediate social interaction, although its ongoing requirement suggests that inclusion relies on students' capacity to articulate and manage their identities.

Toward Conditional Cultural Expression: A Child-Centered Concept

Throughout the results, individuals consistently adjusted cultural visibility according to situational factors. They highlighted various identities within domestic, educational, and social contexts; modified their language based on the audience and perceived proficiency; engaged selectively in culturally sanctioned institutional activities; and distinguished cultural heritage from political loyalty when addressing geopolitical perceptions. Collectively, these actions form a pattern that is inadequately represented by current acculturation or bicultural-identity models.

Bidimensional acculturation frameworks typically categorize adaptation based on a person's inclination to preserve their cultural heritage while engaging with the wider national culture, resulting





in strategies often referred to as integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization (Crocetti et al., 2025). These classifications are beneficial for delineating overarching trends in cultural orientation. Nonetheless, they are less adept at elucidating why an individual student might demonstrate integration in one context, cultural separation in another, and cultural concealment in still another—all within the same academic day.

Bicultural identity integration provides a clearer perspective on whether individuals perceive their cultural identities as harmonious or discordant (Huynh et al., 2011). Studies have linked enhanced bicultural integration to favorable adaptation and a sense of belonging in educational settings (Chen et al., 2022; Safa et al., 2023). Nonetheless, bicultural identity integration is typically understood as a person's expansive view of cultural concord or discord. It fails to comprehensively elucidate how unique institutional requirements, audiences, or political signals trigger alterations in the prominence of certain identity facets.

To overcome this constraint, the current research introduces Conditional Cultural Expression as a child-centric conceptual enhancement. The notion pertains to the iterative process by which students evaluate the manner, means, and degree to which specific aspects of their cultural identities can be articulated safely and coherently in a particular setting. The main focus of analysis is not the individual's comprehensive cultural orientation, but rather the specific situational decision point where cultural visibility is adjusted.

Conditional Cultural Expression encompasses a minimum of three interconnected facets. The initial aspect is linguistic articulation, pertaining to choices regarding the utilization of Mandarin, Hokkien, Filipino, or English based on the audience, proficiency, and expected assessment. The second pertains to symbolic expression, indicating involvement in cultural festivities, performances, attire, and other observable heritage activities. The third aspect is political expression, which pertains to how pupils differentiate cultural heritage from citizenship, national allegiance, and geopolitical ties. In these aspects, expression is influenced by institutional norms, peer responses, cultural community standards, and the overarching political environment.

This notion diverges from acculturation frameworks as it refrains from categorizing students into a singular, comparatively fixed cultural approach. It also diverges from bicultural identity integration as it emphasizes the conditions that render specific kinds of expression feasible, perilous, or essential, rather than the overall harmony or conflict of identities. Variability is thus regarded not as a measurement error or identity ambiguity, but as the primary phenomenon necessitating elucidation.

Conditional Cultural Expression ought to be perceived as an evolving conceptual proposal instead of a fully articulated theory. The limited and context-dependent sample of the current study does not demonstrate its relevance to other communities or educational frameworks. Subsequent investigations ought to explore its facets, precursors, contextual limitations, and ramifications utilizing more extensive and varied samples. Comparative studies might also explore if analogous trends manifest among other ethnoracially marginalized pupils whose cultural backgrounds are linked to geopolitical strife. Nonetheless, the notion serves as a valuable foundation for comprehending how students actively manage ethnic visibility in educational settings that acknowledge diversity while also requiring national uniformity.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. The sample of twelve students, while appropriate for phenomenological depth, cannot support claims of generalizability to the broader Filipino-Chinese student population, to other Chinese schools in North Luzon, or to Chinese schools elsewhere in the Philippines; because the study draws on a single institution, it cannot distinguish which patterns reflect this particular school's implementation of reform from patterns that might generalize across schools with different resourcing or socio-economic profiles. The cross-sectional design captures a single point in each student's developmental trajectory and cannot speak to how identity negotiation and Conditional Cultural Expression change over time. Interviews relied on adolescent self-report, which may under- or overstate emotional strain relative to what teachers or parents would observe. Finally, while bracketing procedures were used throughout, the research team's own proximity to the Filipino-Chinese





community is a resource for rapport but also a potential source of interpretive bias that full epoché can reduce but not eliminate.

Educational Implications

Taken together, the findings suggest that Filipino-Chinese students experience multicultural schooling as both enabling and constraining, relying on adaptive strategies to sustain well-being and participation in ways that carry a real, if often invisible, emotional cost. For educators and school leaders, this points toward the need for multicultural and language policies that recognize diverse identity pathways, differentiate heritage-language instruction by proficiency rather than applying a single track, and move beyond symbolic multiculturalism toward practices that reduce, rather than merely accommodate, the social and emotional costs of identity negotiation.

Knowledge Contribution

This study contributes to three adjacent fields, positioned deliberately against the boundaries of existing constructs. Within multicultural education research, it provides an empirically grounded account, from students' own voices, of the gap between policy intention and lived experience, showing concretely how symbolic inclusion and undifferentiated heritage-language policy can generate the exclusion and anxiety such reforms are meant to prevent. Within bicultural-identity studies, it proposes Conditional Cultural Expression as a situational complement to trait-based models such as Berry's acculturation strategies and Benet-Martínez's bicultural identity integration — distinct also from code-switching research, which describes the linguistic mechanism of a shift without theorizing why a shift is triggered, and from strategic-assimilation accounts, which assume a directional trend toward the majority culture rather than a calibrated, bidirectional regulation of visibility. Within the smaller field of Filipino-Chinese education specifically, it offers one of the few accounts to center adolescent voice rather than institutional history or curriculum policy, and it is among the first to disaggregate social belonging from political belonging in this population using Xu's (2019) "diaspora at home" framing as an empirical rather than purely conceptual lens. Conditional Cultural Expression is offered modestly, as a conceptual refinement grounded in this dataset and requiring further development and testing, not as a fully established theory of bicultural adaptation. A robust and secure ethnic identity, the findings further affirm, remains linked to better academic and psychosocial adjustment (Arel, 2014; Camacho, 2017), underscoring why the conditional, effortful nature of belonging documented here matters beyond the school gates.

Recommendation

Policy Implications

Rather than a general call for policy review, the findings support several specific, actionable changes. First, curriculum authorities should incorporate Filipino-Chinese history directly into the national Araling Panlipunan (Philippine history and social studies) curriculum, rather than confining it to Chinese-school-specific programming; this would address the political-belonging dimension of the findings by making Filipino-Chinese identity visible as part of the national story rather than as a separate, parallel culture to be tolerated. Second, Chinese schools and their curriculum designers should be supported and incentivized to shift Mandarin instruction from what several participants experienced as a "subject of performance" — organized around correctness, comparison, and public evaluation — toward a "tool of communication," organized around differentiated proficiency tracks, lower-stakes conversational practice, and explicit accommodation for mixed-heritage students with limited home exposure to the language. Third, policies should avoid requiring students to resolve their identity into a single fixed category for administrative or curricular purposes, and should instead build in institutional space for the kind of situational identity management this study documents. Fourth, schools should establish simple, ongoing mechanisms for monitoring student emotional well-being specifically during reform implementation, since reform periods themselves, not only steady-state conditions, may be when emotional strain is highest.





Stakeholder-Specific Recommendations

For policymakers, this means treating Filipino-Chinese history and language policy as a national curriculum matter, not solely a private-school matter. For school leaders, this means auditing whether cultural inclusion in their institution is event-based or embedded in daily practice, and resourcing the latter. For teachers, this means recognizing that a joke framed as harmless political commentary may register very differently for a Filipino-Chinese student navigating political-belonging anxiety, and building in low-stakes opportunities for students to correct or decline such framing. For curriculum designers, this means building differentiated Mandarin and Hokkien tracks rather than a single standard curriculum. For school counselors, this means recognizing conditional inclusion and identity-related fatigue as legitimate sources of adolescent stress. Finally, schools should build simple, low-cost mechanisms — advisory sessions, student councils with real curricular input, structured feedback channels — through which Filipino-Chinese students can communicate directly about how reform policies are experienced.

Future Research

Future research should pursue longitudinal designs that track how identity negotiation, Conditional Cultural Expression, and their emotional costs evolve as students move from junior to senior high school and into early adulthood, providing insight into the lasting effects of current reforms (Spiegler et al., 2022). Comparative studies across Chinese schools with differing socio-economic profiles, and across regions of the Philippines beyond North Luzon, would help identify which patterns generalize and which are context-specific. Mixed-methods designs could test whether the five themes identified here, and the proposed Conditional Cultural Expression construct specifically, replicate across larger and more diverse samples. Future work should also more systematically compare full Filipino-Chinese, mixed-heritage, and non-Chinese students within the same Chinese schools, since the present study's disaggregation by heritage background, while suggestive, was not its primary design focus. Finally, given the centrality of political belonging to this study's title and framework, future research should treat it as a primary rather than secondary outcome, potentially incorporating the perspectives of teachers, parents, administrators, and policymakers alongside students to build a fuller account of the ecosystem shaping Filipino-Chinese adolescents' school experience.

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