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## Tracing ethnic socialisation of Chinese in Malaysia to Chinese-medium school

### 从华文媒介语学校探索马来西亚华裔的族群社会化

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**Abstract:** The study examined the ethnic socialisation by comparing the influences of the family and school on the development of ethnic identity. The participants were 397 Malaysians of Chinese descent with Malay, Chinese and English educational backgrounds. Familial ethnic socialisation was moderate and similar for the three groups. They were similar in the resolution and affirmation dimensions of their ethnic identity. The role of Chinese-medium school in ethnic socialisation is evident in the greater exploration of ethnicity by the Chinese-educated participants. This group also valued Chinese-medium education and the Chinese language, Chinese name and Chinese festivals as markers of Chinese identity. However, the other two groups did not believe in marking their Chinese identity. Considering that ethnicised identity is a given in Malaysia, the findings suggest that the Chinese who did not have Chinese educational background may be migrating from Chinese ethnicity to notion of the Malaysian race (Bangsa Malaysia).

**Keywords:** ethnic socialisation, Chinese-medium primary school, familial ethnic socialisation

**摘要:** 本研究通过比较家庭和学校对族群认同发展的影响来探讨族群的社会化。本文调查研究了 397 位马来西亚华裔。研究对象依据其马来语, 华语, 和英语的不同教育背景分为三组。这三个组的家庭族群主义化为适度且相似的。并且他们族群认同的感知和观念特点也相似。华文媒介语学校在族群社会化中的角色很明显, 尤其是对于有华语教育背景的研究对象。该组重视华语教育, 他们的中华性突出体现在华语的应用, 华文的姓名, 和华人的节日等。然而, 其他两组不认同

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自身标志性的华人身份。考虑到族群同一性是马来西亚国家给予的，调查结果建议，没有华文教育背景的华人也许可从华裔族迁移到概念上的马来族。

**关键词:** 族群社会化, 华文媒介语小学, 家庭族群主义化

## 1 Introduction

In the area of family language policy, the interest has been on how language practices, language ideology and language management form a child's language environment (Spolsky 2004) to promote the intergenerational transmission of the heritage language. Studies on language practices have indicated that the one-parent-one-language policy does not guarantee frequent use of the heritage language at home (De Houwer and Bornstein 2016), and other languages have crept into the home because of external social forces. Among the noteworthy external influences on family language policy is the school domain (Spolsky 2012). Other researchers have found that, instead of parents socialising their children into the use of their heritage language, the children's language use may be instrumental in the language socialisation of adults in creating a home language environment that is dominated by the school language (Luykx 2005). Luykx (2005) attributes this phenomenon to children being better in the second language than parents and the pressure to use the school language at home, resulting in the parents adapting to their children's language use. From this, schools are seen as having an important role in the language socialisation of children. By choosing the type of school, parents are in effect choosing how their children would be socialised to use particular languages and how they would be socialised through the use of those languages (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986).

On the language practice component of family language policy, findings from studies on language shift and maintenance are consistent in showing a decline in the use of the heritage language from the older to the younger generations. The shift is from heritage (ethnic) language to primary languages of the wider community, usually the official or national language of the nation-state which is often also the medium of instruction in school. For example, in the case of the Chinese in Malaysia, the shift is away from Chinese dialects towards Mandarin, the standard Chinese language (Hsiao and Lim 2007; Kow 2003; Kuang 2002; Low et al. 2010; Pua and Ting 2015; Ting 2010, 2012; Ting and Mahadhir 2009; Xu 2006). Researchers have also investigated how language ideology may affect parental choices of language for family communication. In the context of the Chinese community in Malaysia, positive attitudes and cultural pride may not translate to increased linguistic use of the heritage language.

This is because, along with the language shift towards Mandarin, there seems to be a concomitant shift in allegiance towards a supra-Chinese identity that disregards dialectal distinctions (Hsiao and Lim 2007; Ting and Chang 2008). The emergence of a supra-Chinese identity is also seen among the Chinese diaspora in Thailand (Morita 2003) and Toronto (Mah 2005). Various researchers have attempted to find out whether a stronger Chinese identity leads to greater use of the heritage language but the results have been inconsistent (Clammer 1982; Djaio 2003; Kang 2004; Mah 2005; Smolicz 1992; Tannenbaum and Howie 2002; Ting and Ooi 2014; Verkuyten and de Wolf 2002). Language is also not a central component of the ethnic identity of some other groups. For instance, Phinney's (1990) review shows that none of the studies on Black identity published in the 1970s and 1980s included language although Black English is considered a marker of Black identity (Kochman 1987). Since correspondence between language ideology and language practices cannot be established for the Chinese diaspora, pursuing this line of inquiry may not shed much light on cultural and language continuity in Chinese families.

Investigating the language management component of family language policy may produce more definitive findings on language practices because the language interventions may modify or at least influence language practice. Language management can take the form of enrolling the children in community-based heritage language programmes which have been found to be crucial in the maintenance of the heritage language among second generation Russian-Jewish immigrants in Israel (Schwartz 2008). In communities where schools use the heritage language as the medium of instruction such as in some Southeast Asian countries, language management is an important angle to investigate in the study of language maintenance efforts. The Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia view Chinese education as indispensable for sustaining the Chinese culture (Tan 1997), and preservation of Chinese culture is the most important reason for parents to choose Chinese primary school in Malaysia (Ting 2013). Chinese-medium schools are so important to the Chinese in Malaysia that politicians use this issue to gain mileage during political campaigns. The language socialisation that takes place in Chinese-medium schools is a given because Chinese is not only used for learning and formal communication but also for informal spoken communication by the school community. In addition, the discursive practices in Chinese-medium schools also orient the students towards a Chinese perspective of nationalism and political awareness (Ku 2003). In Malaysia, research has shown that choice of Chinese-medium school as an avenue for Chinese language socialisation may be more pronounced among parents who were Chinese-educated (Lee and Ting 2015). Chinese parents who were English- and Malay-educated parents preferred Malay-medium schools. Studies on school choice in other settings have indicated

that the choice is linked to ethnic identity (Bagley 1996; Denessen et al. 2005; Henig 1996; Karsten et al. 2003; Weiher and Tedin 2002). In Malaysia, whether the choice of Chinese-medium school is linked to a stronger Chinese identity remains to be investigated. It is also not known whether the family or the school plays a bigger role in cultural and language socialisation of the Chinese community.

The study examined the influence of family and school socialisation on development of Chinese identity of Chinese with Malay, Chinese and English educational backgrounds. The specific aspects studied were: (1) familial ethnic socialisation, (2) development of ethnic identity, (3) beliefs on markers of Chinese identity, and (4) beliefs on outcomes of Chinese-medium school. In this paper, the Malaysians of Chinese descent are referred to as “Chinese” and the standard Chinese language is also referred to as “Chinese”. The three groups of participants are referred as Malay-, Chinese- and English-educated participants. The term “ethnic language” is used to refer to heritage language.

## 2 Background on the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia

The Chinese in Malaysia accounts for 21.36 % of 30.9 million national population and 22.63 % of the 2.7 million Sarawak state population in 2015 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2015). The main ethnic group in Malaysia are the indigenous (61.79 %) comprising the Malay, Sarawak and Sabah indigenous groups, and the Orang Asli. The Chinese in Malaysia have multiple levels of identities, that is, the Chinese dialectal identity at one level (e. g., Foochow, Hokkien, Cantonese), Chinese at another level and Malaysian at the national identity level (Tan 1997).

The Chinese living in Malaysia are at least second or third generation descendants of immigrants from China. They are not under as much pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture compared to Chinese in Indonesia and Myanmar. In Indonesia, for example, policies prohibiting the use of Chinese or any expression of Chinese culture have resulted in a preference for Indonesian names (Tan 1997). The Chinese in Malaysia are not as assimilated as the second generation Chinese in Thailand who are educated in Thai, and have adopted Thai names, dress and language (see Than 1997). Cultural maintenance among the Chinese in Malaysia is strong to the extent that they have been labelled as *kaum immigran* or *kaum pendatang* (immigrants) on a few occasions, one of which was by Malay intellectuals in 1986 (Lee 1997). In Malaysia, the government partially funds the Chinese-medium primary school and allows Chinese-based political parties. There is also little restriction on establishing temples,

cemeteries, clans or dialect associations, unlike in Myanmar (Than 1997). Clearly Malaysia has the three institutions that uphold the Chinese identity which are Chinese schools, Chinese mass media and Chinese associations (Suryadinata 1997). The importance of these cultural institutions and elements for the maintenance of the Chinese identity in Malaysia will be described next in the context of external and internal criteria of ethnic membership.

The external criteria for ethnic membership are usually physical appearance and language (Giles and Johnson 1981; Suryadinata 1997). Chiew (1997, p.223) stated that “if one has the ‘looks’ of a Chinese but has few or even no Chinese cultural attributes except his Chinese name, non-Chinese may still identify him as a Chinese”. Physical appearance marks Chinese ancestry in Sri Lanka and Pakistan but the Sri Lankans and Pakistanis of Chinese descent do not know or practise Chinese culture, let alone speak the Chinese language (Lin-Rodrigo 2001; Tham 2001, as cited in Rastogi 2009). On the contrary, Chinese language is a strong marker of Chinese identity in Malaysia. The Chinese are shifting away from Chinese dialects but maintaining the use of Chinese whether in Sarawak (Puah and Ting 2015; Ting 2010, 2012; Ting and Mahadhir 2009) or in West Malaysia (Hsiao and Lim 2007; Kow 2003; Kuang 2002; Low, Nicholas, and Wales 2010; Xu 2006). Many urban middle-class parents choose Chinese-medium primary schools so that their children can at least read newspapers in Chinese (Ting and Mahadhir 2009). To Malaysian Chinese university students in their twenties, language is the most salient Chinese identity marker (Musa and Ting 2015).

The internal criteria of ethnic membership are subjective, depending on significance attached to emblems of Chinese culture. Lee (1997) noted that Chinese newspaper, television and radio programmes in Chinese, and lion dance performances are important to Chinese in Malaysia. The association of religion and Chinese identity is not as clear-cut. In the past, some Chinese hold on to the *huaren zongjiao* (“Chinese religion”) which refers to the religious traditions of China infused with local religious beliefs and practices (Tan 2000, as cited in Lee 2009). Chinese identity and religious identity have begun to be seen as separate but Chinese in Malaysia usually do not convert to Islam because this is seen as abandonment of their Chinese identity due to the strong identification of Islam with Malay ethnicity. Lee (1997) estimated that 0.4 per cent of Chinese in Malaysia are Muslims. However, adopting Christianity is not seen as denial of Chinese identity (Nagata 1995). A majority of Chinese in Malaysia are Buddhists and they are mostly Chinese-educated and a minority are Christians, mostly English-educated, but many Foochows in Sarawak and Sitiawan who are Chinese-educated are also Christians (Lee 1997, p. 104). To find out the internal criteria of membership in the Chinese community in Malaysia, it is necessary to study their views on Chinese identity markers. Such a study will

also uncover the meanings they attach to their descent-related being (paternity) and behaviour (patrimony), a perspective with Fishman (1988) refers to as the phenomenological aspect of ethnicity (as cited in Karunaratne 2009).

### 3 Method of study

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 397 Chinese parents living in urban Kuching, the capital city of the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. Table 1 shows that most of the respondents were in their thirties (50.8%) and forties (35.3%), primarily female (64.2%), and 46.0% had at least secondary education whereas another 44.8% had college and university education.

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of participants.

Demographic characteristics		Total ( <i>n</i> = 397)	
		Frequency	(%)
Gender	Female	255	64.2
	Male	142	35.8
Age	20s	16	4.0
	30s	202	50.8
	40s	140	35.3
	50s	34	8.6
	60s	5	1.3
Level of education	Primary	33	8.3
	Secondary	186	46.9
	College	83	20.9
	University	95	23.9
Medium of primary education	Chinese	237	59.6
	English	80	20.2
	Malay	80	20.2

To find out the influence of school environment on development of Chinese identity, the respondents were grouped according to their educational background, that is, the medium of instruction in their primary school. Out of 397 respondents, 239 were Chinese-educated, 81 were English-educated, and 80 were Malay-educated. The medium of instruction in their secondary school was not considered because most Malaysians proceed to public schools where

the medium of instruction is English or Malay, depending on the prevailing national language policy. In Sarawak, English was the medium of instruction until it was replaced by Malay, and the process was completed in 1988 at upper sixth form level. Therefore, Malaysians living in Sarawak aged 47 and above in 2016 are English-educated and those below 47 are Malay-educated.

### 3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire elicited demographic characteristics of participants, and contained the Familial Ethnic Socialisation Measurement, the Ethnic Identity Scale, and sections on beliefs on Chinese identity markers and outcomes of Chinese-medium education. In effect, the questionnaire examined the participants' language ideology with respect to their ethnic language.

The Familial Ethnic Socialisation Measure (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2004) was employed to find out the role played by the participants' family in socialising them into the Chinese culture. The Familial Ethnic Socialisation Measure comprising 12 items assessed the extent of family promotion of participation in cultural activities and contact with ethnic traditions (Table 2). Both overt and covert aspects of familial ethnic socialisation were assessed (e. g., "My family teaches me about our family's ethnic/cultural background" and "Our home is decorated with things that reflect my ethnic/cultural background" respectively).

**Table 2:** Mean scores of familial ethnic socialisation for Malay-, Chinese- and English-educated participants.

Familial ethnic socialisation items	Participants' educational background						ANOVA results		
	Malay		Chinese		English		F	Sig.	Multiple comparison (Bonferroni)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
1. My family teaches me about my ethnic/cultural background	3.59	0.96	3.43	0.96	3.49	0.95	0.85	0.43	M-C E-C M-E
2. My family encourages me to respect the cultural values and beliefs of our ethnic/cultural background	3.78	1.00	3.65	0.91	3.90	0.96	2.16	0.12	M-C E-C M-E

(continued)

Table 2: (continued)

Familial ethnic socialisation items	Participants' educational background						ANOVA results		
	Malay		Chinese		English		F	Sig.	Multiple comparison (Bonferroni)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
3. My family participates in activities that are specific to my ethnic group	3.09	0.96	3.08	0.96	3.08	1.09	0.005	0.99	M-C E-C M-E
4. Our home is decorated with things that reflect my ethnic/cultural background	2.99	1.07	3.07	1.06	3.02	1.08	0.20	0.82	M-C E-C M-E
5. The people who my family spends time with the most are people who share the same ethnic background as my family	3.34	0.90	3.16	1.06	3.15	1.03	0.98	0.37	M-C E-C M-E
6. My family teaches me about the values and beliefs of our ethnic/cultural background	3.69	0.77	3.50	0.88	3.52	1.02	1.37	0.25	M-C E-C M-E
7. My family talks about how important it is to know about my ethnic/cultural background	3.44	0.98	3.52	0.91	3.54	0.98	0.29	0.74	M-C E-C M-E
8. My family celebrates holidays that are specific to my ethnic/cultural background	3.81	0.98	3.62	1.01	3.74	1.20	1.15	0.32	M-C E-C M-E
9. My family teaches me about the history of my ethnic/cultural background	3.21	0.96	3.35	0.96	3.18	1.00	1.33	0.26	M-C E-C M-E
10. My family listens to music sung or played by artists from my ethnic/cultural background	3.15	1.08	3.17	1.00	2.91	1.03	1.93	0.15	M-C E-C M-E
11. My family attends things such as concerts, plays, festivals, or other events that represent my ethnic/cultural background	2.85	1.02	2.97	1.02	2.72	0.99	1.79	0.17	M-C E-C M-E
12. My family feels a strong loyalty to our ethnic/cultural background	3.65	1.01	3.40	1.01	3.74	1.03	4.25	0.02	M-C E-C* M-E
Overall mean	3.38	0.68	3.33	0.70	3.33	0.72	0.18	0.83	

Notes: \*Significant difference at  $p < 0.05$ ; M = Malay-educated, C = Chinese-educated, E = English-educated; Means range from 1 for not at all to 5 for very often, and the mid-point is 3.0.

The Ethnic Identity Scale (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2004) comprised two parts, designed to identify the strength of the participants' ethnic identity in general without specific reference to the Chinese identity. The first part required respondents to define their ethnic group, "Please write what you consider to be your ethnic group here \_\_\_\_\_ (e. g., Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban and Bidayuh) and refer to this when you answer the questions below". The second part shown in Table 3 comprised 17 items on the three components of ethnic identity formation: (1) exploration which is engagement of individuals in activities and experiences that teach about the ethnic group; (2) resolution which is a sense of what one's ethnicity means; and (3) affirmation which is the extent of development of one individual's positive sense of group membership.

Next, the measure of beliefs on Chinese identity markers was formulated to identify the participants' beliefs on the important aspects of their membership in the Chinese community, with emphasis on the ethnic language. The measure consisted of 13 questions on markers such as cultural practices and language (Table 4). Participants were also asked what they would do if their children have lost their Chinese language, following Wu (2005).

Finally, the 12-item measure of beliefs on outcomes of Chinese-medium education (Table 5) was adapted from Chen and Zimitat (2006) and incorporated new items on appreciation of Chinese culture, proficiency in languages (i. e., Malay, English and Mandarin), capability in mathematics and science subject and character development. This section of the questionnaire on the participants' beliefs concerning the outcomes of Chinese- and Malay-medium education was developed based on interviews with 30 Chinese participants in a pilot study.

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was found to be high with Cronbach alpha values of 0.908 for Familial Ethnic Socialisation Measure, 0.829 for Ethnic Identity Scale; 0.864 for beliefs on Chinese identity markers, and 0.826 for beliefs on outcomes of Chinese-medium education.

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

Permission for the study was obtained from the Federal and State Education Departments, and subsequently from the principals of 21 selected schools in Kuching, Sarawak. In some schools, the teachers helped to distribute the questionnaires to their students who gave them to their parents. In others, the first researcher met the parents during lunch and after school. Parents who agreed to participate in the study signed a consent form before they filled in the questionnaire.

Of the 726 questionnaires distributed, 400 questionnaires were usable (55.1% response rate). After three outliers were eliminated, 397 questionnaires

Table 3: Mean scores of ethnic identity for Malay-, Chinese- and English-educated participants.

Ethnic Identity Scale items	Participants' educational background						ANOVA		
	Malay		Chinese		English		F	Sig.	Multiple comparison (Bonferroni)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
<b>Exploration</b>	2.90	0.39	3.10	0.39	2.93	0.510	9.09	0.001	M-C* E-C* M-E
1. I have participated in any activities that would teach me about my ethnicity.#	2.82	0.79	3.20	0.72	2.85	0.76	11.4	0.001	M-C* E-C* M-E
2. I have experienced things that reflect my ethnicity, such as eating food, listening to music	3.28	0.48	3.24	0.52	3.12	0.74	1.63	0.20	M-C E-C M-E
3. I have attended events that have helped me learn more about my ethnicity	2.86	0.69	3.13	0.64	2.89	0.66	7.04	0.001	M-C* E-C* M-E
4. I have read books/magazines/newspapers or other materials that have taught me about my ethnicity	2.98	0.55	3.15	0.58	3.01	0.68	3.40	0.03	M-C E-C M-E
5. I have participated in activities that have exposed me to my ethnicity	2.81	0.71	3.14	0.61	2.85	0.73	10.79	0.001	M-C* E-C* M-E
6. I have learned about my ethnicity by doing things such as reading, searching the internet, or keeping up with current events	2.88	0.62	3.13	0.56	3.02	0.62	5.66	0.004	M-C* E-C M-E
7. I have participated in activities that have taught me about my ethnicity	2.69	0.63	2.74	0.64	2.79	0.71	0.47	0.62	M-C E-C M-E
<b>Resolution</b>	3.24	0.36	3.14	0.39	3.21	0.51	1.95	0.14	M-C E-C M-E
8. I am clear about what my ethnicity means to me	3.29	0.51	3.24	0.53	3.24	0.64	0.21	0.81	M-C E-C M-E
9. I understand how I feel about my ethnicity	3.19	0.51	3.17	0.54	3.18	0.63	0.02	0.98	M-C E-C M-E
10. I know what my ethnicity means to me	3.28	0.48	3.11	0.52	3.12	0.70	2.71	0.07	M-C E-C M-E

(continued)