International
Journal of Society, Culture & Language
IJSCL

Journal homepage: www.ijscl.net
ISSN 2329-2210 (online)

Ethnic Identity and Other-Group Orientation of Ethnic Chinese in Malaysia

Su-Hie Ting[1a], Su-Lin Ting[2b]

ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received May 2020
Received in revised form July 2020
Accepted July 2020
Available online September 2020

KEYWORDS:

Ethnic identity
Ethnic Chinese
Intergroup relations
Plural society
Assimilation

Abstract

The study examined the ethnic identity and other-group orientation of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. The data were collected from 504 Chinese respondents (252 students, 252 parents) using Phinney's (1992) Multiethnic Identity Measure. The results showed that the parents had a stronger ethnic identity than their children. For both groups, the mean scores for affirmation and belonging were the highest among the four ethnic identity components, and the ethnic identity achievement mean scores were the lowest. The results indicate that the Foochow Chinese respondents had a foreclosed identity, whereby they have made a commitment to their ethnicity without extensive exploration of the meaning of belonging to their ethnic group. Gender and socio-economic background have significant effects on strength of ethnic identity, but Chinese-medium education is not linked to ethnic identity. The findings suggest that the Chinese are moderating their ethnic identity, but their positive other-group orientation is far from the level of cultural adaptation that is required for assimilation.

[1] Associate Professor, Email: suhieting@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)
Tel: +60-82-581760
[2] MA, Email: dslting@pilley.edu.my
[a] Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia
[b] Pilley Methodist Institute, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Research on the ethnic identity of the Chinese diaspora in the United States, Canada, and Australia has shown that Chinese identity is tied to cultural practices and the language. If the children of Chinese immigrants grow up with family socialisation into Chinese cultural practices, they have a stronger Chinese identity (Mah, 2005). However, the children may not consider speaking Chinese necessary to express their ethnic group membership. Chinese people in various parts of the world consider ethnic identity as an inherited attribute (Clammer, 1982; Mah, 2005; Ting & Ooi, 2014; Ting & Puah, 2015; Verdery, 1978). The Chinese surname marks their Chinese identity (Wong & Xiao, 2010). While the expression of Chinese identity through speaking the language is unimportant to some, it is important to some immigrant children (Kang, 2004; Wong & Xiao, 2010), but mostly their parents (Voon & Pearson, 2011). The government of China recognised the importance of language as an identity marker and promoted standard Putonghua to strengthen the Chinese identity (Zhang, 2019). Whether the expression of Chinese identity is through cultural practices or language, the Chinese diaspora have maintained their ethnic identity despite living among other ethnic groups.

When the Chinese live among other ethnic groups, whether in an immigrant context or a multilingual environment, acculturation or assimilation may take place. Teske and Nelson (1974) stated that acculturation is unidirectional involving ethnic minorities changing in the direction of a majority culture, whereas assimilation is a two-way reciprocal process involving changes in the original cultures that are in continuous contact. Acculturation eventually leads to assimilation, whereby internal changes in values take place within the groups that are in contact, and the reference (majority) group also changes and develops out-group acceptance (Teske & Nelson, 1974). Political pressures exerted on the minority groups to acculturate may produce the opposite effect, that is, cultural distinctiveness may be heightened because the minority group members feel insecure and act to preserve their identity. Tan (2001, p. 951) reported that in the face of latent hostility, the Chinese immigrants develop stronger ingroup solidarity which results in an enhanced "internal outsider identity". However, it may be that while the older Chinese cling on to their Chinese identity, the younger Chinese are becoming more open to assimilation. In Malaysia, for instance, the effects of the integration agenda of the school curriculum (History and Civic Education) are beginning to be seen. Awang, Ahmad, Mumpuniarti, and Rahman's (2019) survey showed that the Malay, Chinese and Indian in West Malaysia exhibit cultural appreciation and social acceptance of other ethnic groups. However, they still have difficulty with cultural adaptation and ethnic compromising, which require priority to be given to national identity over ethnic identity. Rahim (2018) found that civic engagement in non-governmental organisations developed the other-ethnic orientation of the youth, which will lead to the bridging of the ethnic divide. Although there are studies on ethnic harmony such as Nordin, Alias, and Siraj (2018), little is known about whether a strong ethnic identity can co-exist with a positive orientation towards other ethnic groups.

Thus far, research on Chinese identity has focused on the younger generation because of the imminent danger of them losing their ethnic identity (Kang, 2004; Mah, 2005; Morita, 2005; Ting & Ooi, 2014; Wong & Xiao, 2010). Little is known about how ethnic identity varies with age although some researchers have found age differences in attitudes towards Chinese languages (Puah & Ting, 2015). There has been a weaker identification with Chinese identity in favour of the Thai identity from the second generation onwards among Thais of Chinese descent (Lee, 2014; Morita, 2005). In Malaysia, some younger Chinese have also expressed inclination towards the national identity (Lindstrand, 2016; Wang, 1988). At this juncture, it is important to study the ethnic identity of the older and younger Chinese within the same study and juxtapose it with an investigation of their intergroup attitudes as there may be cosmopolitan shifts in ethnic identity and possible diffusion of traditional forms of ethnic cultures.

The present study examined the strength of the Chinese identity of parents and their children among the Foochow Chinese in Sarawak, Malaysia. The two research questions are: