

“It looks like a tinderbox you know”: Exploring Chinese Perspectives on Ethnic Dynamics in Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract: *The study examines Chinese perspectives on ethnic dynamics in Sarawak at a personal level and at the national level. The case study involved interviews with three Chinese participants living in Sarawak, Malaysia. They have worked in the civil service, with two who are still in service and another who is retired. The analysis of the interview results shows positive perceptions of ethnic relations at the personal level. Due to their national school experience, the participants felt a sense of closeness with other ethnic groups. This laid the foundation for them to build cross-cultural friendships with friends and colleagues from other ethnic groups. Moreover, early exposure to multiculturalism through their parents engenders positive attitudes and openness towards other ethnicities. Being raised in a mixed-ethnic family can also cultivate a feeling of connection to other ethnic groups. While studying abroad, the participants felt solidarity with fellow Malaysians (in-group) and their shared national identity supercedes racial differences. However, the participants considered ethnic dynamics at the national level to be not satisfactory. They believe race and religion are inextricably linked, and that this connection is sometimes exploited for political gain by creating feelings of “us” versus “them”. Another area of contention is financial assistance not reaching the underprivileged regardless of race. Nevertheless, there are unifying factors like national sports which brings Malaysians together as one. The study proposes a model of ethnic dynamics at personal and national levels based on the Chinese perspective.*

Keywords: Ethnic Relations, Cross-Cultural, Multiculturalism, Personal, National.

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society characterised by a diverse population composition. The primary ethnic groups include Malays, Chinese and Indians, each with its own cultural and linguistic heritage. According to Statista Research Department (2023), approximately 70.1 percent of Malaysia’s population identifies as Bumiputera, while 22.6 percent identifies as Chinese, and 6.6 percent as Indians. The indigenous Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia are divided into three main groups (the Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay), while Sabah has 32 ethnic groups (predominantly Kadazandusun), and Sarawak has 27 ethnic groups, (predominantly Iban) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011).

Several studies in Malaysia have indicated that a preference for close friendships with others of the same ethnicity (Lee, 2017; Mohd Tamring et al., 2020). These findings in preference for in-group connections indicate that integration among the heterogeneous population may not have reached desired levels. Interactions with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds are critical in promoting cross-cultural understanding, empathy and solidarity, thereby shaping inter-ethnic dynamics (Chin et al., 2015; Kao & Joyner, 2006; Vaquera & Kao, 2006; Yip et al., 2010). The prime ministers of Malaysia have endeavoured to foster unity through the creation of slogans. For instance, the sixth Malaysian prime minister, Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, introduced the "One Malaysia" concept, urging Malaysian citizens to embrace a heightened sense of responsibility to foster national unity. The current Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim promotes "Malaysia Madani" which highlights the aspiration for a civil and inclusive Malaysia. These slogans not only advocate for good governance, sustainable development and racial harmony but also serve as calls of action to bridge societal divides and promote respect among different ethnic groups.

In efforts to strengthen ethnic relations, various policies and measures have been implemented, such as the Malaysian National Service Programme (Al Ramiah et al., 2014) and mandatory university courses in ethnic relations (Jawan & Ahmad, 2006). The government is also firmly committed to enforcing strict measures against any entity inciting sentiments on the sensitive 3R issues (royalty, religion, and race), aiming to prevent public discourse that could potentially breach legal boundaries and challenge the constitution (Husin, 2023).

While numerous efforts have been made to promote racial harmony, the reality remains that managing ethnic diversity has become increasingly complex and challenging. One can choose to see the positive and there are studies reporting positive interethnic interactions. Studies like Masrukhin and Sriyanto (2022) shows a positive trend in ethnic relations, indicated by 60% of Universiti Malaya students reporting high levels of cross-cultural tolerance and acceptance. Similarly, Lino and Mohd Hashim (2020) found that public university students expressed high tolerance and support for cultural freedom, and demonstrated curiosity and positive emotions towards diverse cultures. Based on these findings, Malaysia seems to have the desired racial harmony.

However, other findings that point to simmering ethnic conflict and social exclusion cannot be ignored. More specifically, there seems to be differences in attitudes of majority and minority groups towards inter-ethnic acceptance. For example, Aminnuddin (2020) found that Malays exhibit a greater reluctance to have neighbours of a different race or religion compared to Chinese. When examining students' ethnic consciousness, Chin et al.'s (2015) study show that Malay students uphold Malay dominance and actively work to strengthen the unity of the Malay community. The minority groups may feel a stronger need to make adjustments and allowances in order to live peaceably in the Malaysian society. These findings suggest that the vision of ethnic integration and fully harmonious ethnic relations is still in the distance. Many have also remarked that an affirmative policy favouring the majority Malay community exacerbates tensions between ethnic groups and solidifies divisive status disparities stemming from their unequal societal standings (Al Ramiah et al., 2014; Chin et al., 2015; Koh, 2015; Yow, 2017).

The variability in results could be attributed to several individual-level factors, such as personal early schooling experience (Ahmad et al., 2018; Jawan et al., 2020) which influences attitudes towards cultural diversity and intergroup dynamics. Family background (Dalege & Degner, 2013; Duda, 2016) especially the influence of parents (Hughes et al., 2006; Ting, 2022)

plays a significant role in shaping attitudes toward other ethnic groups and fostering inclusive or exclusive social behaviours. Religion may shape perceptions of tolerance, acceptance and cooperation across ethnic lines (Chin et al., 2015; Hassan et al., 2021; Muslim et al., 2012; Wan Husin et al., 2021; Yusoff, 2004). Furthermore, the level of knowledge towards rights can affect awareness of entitlements and advocacy abilities (Muslim et al., 2011, 2012). In addition to personal factors, external influences such as the media portrayal of ethnic groups can either foster mutual understanding and acceptance or perpetuate stereotypes and biases (Ahmad, 2011; Baharin et al., 2017; Chang & Kho, 2017; Tamam et al., 2006, 2008). Political manipulations and governmental preferential policies have also been identified as significant factors contributing to the escalation of tension in ethnic relations in Malaysia (Ationg et al., 2018; Lee, 2017).

Thus far, there are mixed findings on positive and negative aspects of ethnic relations in Malaysia, and we posit three factors that may resolve some of the inconsistencies in findings. Most of the studies were on university students, particularly those in Peninsular Malaysia (Al Ramiah et al., 2014; Chin et al., 2015; Hassan et al., 2021; Mohd Tamring et al., 2020; Muslim et al., 2011; Tamam & Krauss, 2017; Wan Husin et al., 2021; Zainal et al., 2010). Firstly, university students are still in their formative years as they have not entered the workplace, and might have different views from working adults. For example, Yaacob et al.'s (2019) study involving 615 students and 113 lecturers in public and private Malaysian universities show that students have slightly better perceptions of diversity climate for all dimensions than lecturers, and the students have higher cultural pluralism scores than the lecturers. Thus, the participant characteristics need to be checked to understand possible differences in perceptions of ethnic dynamics.

Secondly, the concentration of the studies in Peninsular Malaysia limits generalisability of findings to Sabah and Sarawak. This is because in Peninsular Malaysia, the population ratio of the Malay to Chinese and Indian is roughly 6:3:1. On the other hand in Sabah and Sarawak, there is richer ethnic diversity, and the population ratio of the Malay to Chinese and Indigenous is roughly 1:1:2. The Kadazandusun and Iban constitute almost 30 percent of the Sabah and Sarawak populations respectively (Sabah State Government, n.d., Sarawak Tourism Board, 2024). Therefore, East Malaysia presents unique social and demographic structures, which may influence ethnic dynamics as there is no obvious majority group.

Thirdly, the past findings on ethnic relations are based on questionnaire data. Ethnic matters are considered sensitive in Malaysia and participants may be reluctant to disclose their underlying beliefs, attitudes and values that may be perceived as unacceptable by other ethnic groups (Ting, 2022). Interviews may yield different and more in-depth insights into interethnic interactions. Considering the focus has been on questionnaire data from university students in Peninsular Malaysia, it is important to research ethnic relations from the perspective of working adults in East Malaysia using qualitative data to add to what is currently known about ethnic relations. Such studies may shed light on the mixed findings on positive and negative ethnic relations.

Therefore, this study seeks to understand the reasons leading to positive and negative perceptions of ethnic dynamics in Sarawak at the individual and national levels.

2. Method of Study

The descriptive study focused on three Chinese individuals (one male and two females) residing in Sarawak, Malaysia. Two individuals are employed in the civil service sector, while another is a retired civil servant. One is in the T20 group, another in M40, and the third is in B40.

One interview was conducted in English, while the other two were conducted in Chinese. The purpose of the study was explained, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. They were also assured that their involvement was voluntary and that their identities would be protected by pseudonyms. The interview sessions were audio recorded once participants had given their consent. The interviews were guided by the following questions:

- i. Do you have any family members from other ethnic groups? Friends? Colleagues?
- ii. Do you feel close to other ethnic groups? Yes/No. Why do you say so?
- iii. Are there events showing good ethnic relations? Tell me a few events that unite Malaysians.
- iv. Did you ever experience good ethnic relations yourself?
- v. Are there problems in ethnic relations? If yes, tell me a few specific events.
- vi. Did you ever get racist remarks or treatment?
- vii. Is the current state of ethnic relations satisfactory? Yes/ No? Why?
- viii. Will there/Can there be equality among ethnic groups in Malaysia?
- ix. Which topic is often connected with race?
- x. Which topic is the most influenced by race?

The combined duration of the three interviews amounted to 86 minutes. Data analysis procedures were guided by Caulfield's (2019) thematic analysis framework. The thematic analysis focused solely on participants' perceptions of ethnic relations at both personal and national levels. Excerpts were extracted from the interview transcripts to explain the findings of the study. The transcripts were minimally edited to enhance readability while preserving the conversational tone.

3. Results

This section reports the perspectives of three participants (P1, P2 and P3) on their (1) personal views on closeness with other ethnic groups, (2) views on ethnic relations at national level, and (3) views on the topics that are often connected with race. The responses obtained from participants are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows the model of ethnic dynamics at the personal and national levels based on the Chinese perspective. The x-axis shows ethnic dynamics, positive on the right-hand side and negative on the left-hand side. The y-axis moves from personal level (below) to national level (above). There are four quadrants. Starting from the top right-hand corner, Quadrant 1 Positive ethnic dynamics at the national level reflects ethnic integration. Going clockwise, Quadrant 2 Positive ethnic dynamics at the personal level reflects openness to ethnic diversity. Quadrant 3 Negative ethnic dynamics at the personal level reflects ingroup bias while Quadrant 4 Negative ethnic dynamics at the national level reflects ethnic tension in the society.

Model of Ethnic Dynamics at Personal and National Level

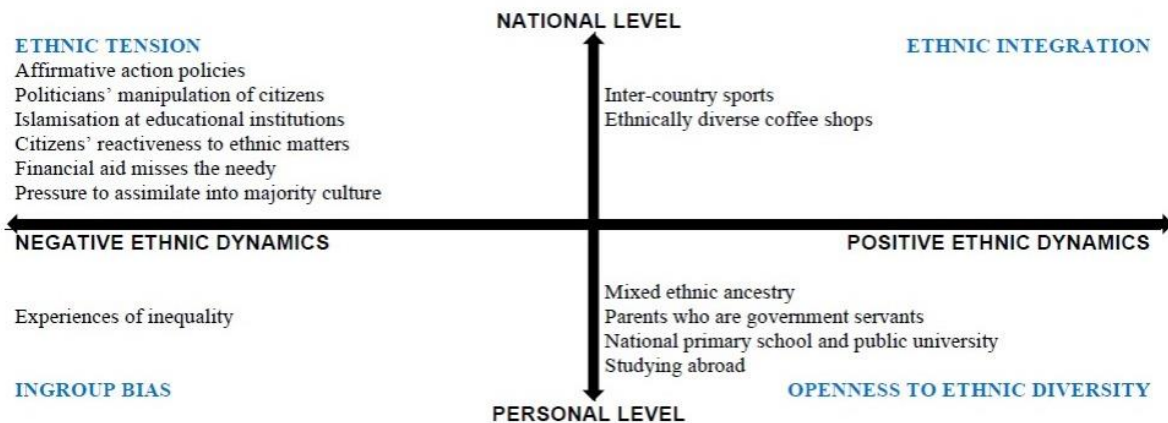


Figure 1: Model of ethnic dynamics at personal and national level based on Chinese perspective

i. Personal views on closeness with other ethnic groups

At a personal level, all three Chinese participants expressed a deep sense of closeness and affinity with individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. As shown in Figure 1 (bottom right-hand corner), the openness to ethnic diversity is influenced by mixed-ethnic ancestry, parents who are government servants, attendance at national primary schools and public universities, and experiences of living abroad. Each of these reasons for openness to ethnic diversity will be illustrated by excerpts.

First, mixed-ethnic ancestry has a pervasive influence on perceptions of ethnic relations at a personal level. P2, in particular, has a unique link to the Lun Bawang people, as his grandmother is Lun Bawang. Excerpt 1 shows how P2’s upbringing in a mixed-ethnic family has shaped his sense of closeness with indigenous people.

Excerpt 1:

because of the fact that my grandmother is a native of this Sarawak, I tend to have some closeness with Orang Ulu tribes and some of the native people. Because of that association. Maybe conscious part of my side to align with Sarawak indigenous. (P2).

P2’s indigenous blood line has naturally led him to develop emotional bonds with the indigenous communities. His grandmother had passed away before he was born. Although P2 did not live with her and did not benefit from interacting with her and getting to know her experiences and perceptions as an Orang Ulu, he still felt a sense of kinship with the indigenous peoples of Sarawak. His indigenous ancestry prompted him to consciously align himself with the interests and concerns of the indigenous community.

Second, the family background of P1 and P2 plays a pivotal role in nurturing their bond with people from different ethnic communities. Their parents worked in government departments, and they also ended up working in the civil service. As part of their upbringing, their parents took them to visit friends from different ethnic backgrounds during festive occasions such as Gawai, Christmas and Raya. They also hosted open houses for these friends during Chinese New Year. This exposure to diverse cultural celebrations and interactions with people from

different ethnic backgrounds from childhood created a mindset that is open to inclusiveness, and they continued the visiting practice in their adulthood.

Excerpt 2:

During festive occasions, I often went visiting with my parents. Due to my father's job as a government servant, he has many Malay colleagues. They (parents) set a good example for us, so we also learn from them. (P1)

Excerpt 3:

I think it's because of my father. My father was a government servant in later years. He took early retirement and joined politics. and in this constituency, there were mixed races...even when before he joined politic, he often took us to visit our native friends during Christmas, our Malay friend during Raya, it is usual, and we look forward to it and he always... he would take me and my brothers to visit long houses and observe their ceremony and so I grew up under this environment. (P2)

Third, in addition to early exposure to multicultural celebrations, P1's experience in a national primary and secondary school also provided a crucial foundation for her understanding and appreciation of diverse ethnicities. In school, her teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds formed close relationships with students, resulting in P1 developing favorable impressions of different ethnicities. Furthermore, during her time at the public university, P1 engaged in group projects with peers from different ethnic groups. This collaborative experience not only enriched her academic endeavours but also enhanced her ability to collaborate effectively across cultural boundaries, fostering a deeper appreciation of multiculturalism.

Fourth, P2 had the experience of being abroad. He had previously undertaken postgraduate studies in Australia. In Excerpt 4, P2 explained that while Malaysians are typically aware of ethnic differences within their own country, living abroad in Australia led them to prioritise their national identity as "Malaysian" over their specific ethnicity, in the context of the dominant "white Australian" culture.

Excerpt 4:

We always feel a sense of ethnic differences in our own country, and we tend to rationalize it based on ancestral differences, cultural differences. But when I study in Australia, I feel I am the Malaysia first. The identity of Malaysian. I stayed with two colleagues first and they are from west Malaysia, we stay in the apartment for about six months, and we identified ourselves as united under Malaysian flag versus the white flag versus the white Australian. So, the sense of the Malaysians is very strong when we are overseas. (P2).

ii. Perspective on ethnic dynamics at national level

This section describes the reasons for the negative perception of ethnic dynamics at the national level and highlights the potential of inter-country sports to unite Malaysians across the ethnic divide.

When asked about their perspective on ethnic dynamics at the national level, all three Chinese participants expressed dissatisfaction. P3 condemned politicians in Peninsular Malaysia for pursuing personal interests at the expense of other races by ethnicising incidents to fan ethnic sentiments. She was also disappointed with certain politicians who caused fissures in ethnic relations and called them the "black sheep".

Similarly, P2 voiced his dissatisfaction with the current state of ethnic dynamics. He said that as long as Malaysia grapples with ethnic issues, true racial harmony will remain elusive. Excerpt 5 provides examples of issues that disrupt the fragile racial unity such as “Bak Kut Teh” (a pork soup dish) as national heritage food, and the existence of vernacular schools, which cater to specific ethnic communities.

Excerpt 5:

because as long as we still have racial problem, as long as we still argue on issue like “Bak Kut Teh”, and vernacular school, as long as we still have this, as long as we still have the majority race demanding that their supremacy should be sustained, their privilege you know, it’s not satisfactory. It looks like a tinder box, you know, any spark, it will spark, a very bad situation... if there is disunity it should not because of racial disunity, it should be because of political ideology disunity or social status disunity like the difference between the rich and the poor. (P2).

P2 used the metaphor of a “tinder box” to describe the precarious nature of the current social and political climate in Malaysia. This indicates that the underlying tensions and divisions within Malaysian society are so intense that even minor incidents or provocations have the potential to escalate into serious conflicts or crises. P2 also expressed disappointment with the outcomes of the recent election and the emergence of the Undi 18 movement. (Vote 18). Undi18 is a movement driven by Malaysian youth who effectively campaigned for the amendment of Article 119(1) of the Federal Constitution, resulting in the reduction of the minimum voting age in Malaysia from 21 to 18 years old (Hussain, 2023). P2 once held idealistic beliefs about a future where racial harmony could be achieved, but now sees those beliefs as unrealistic because the youth, who are often seen as the future of society, fall prey to exploitation of ethnic issues (Excerpt 6). He has bleak outlook on the prospects of achieving genuine harmony and unity among diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Excerpt 6:

I am very disappointed, because I think young generation also being poisoned by politic racial agenda. so, I don’t know I used to think there would be a day but now I don’t think there will be a day. Maybe I’m a living in the clouds, maybe the whole story of Malaysia, the whole narrative of Malaysia will always be like this. There will be no end to this racial disunity. (P2)

P3 attributed the tense state of ethnic dynamics to underlying inequalities (Excerpt 7). The perceived inequalities in opportunities, particularly in jobs and education, deepen existing divides and fuel resentment between Bumiputera (“prince of the soil” when literally translated, referring to Malay and indigenous) and non-Bumiputera. Such feelings of unfair treatment or disadvantage not only strain relations but also have the potential to escalate ethnic tensions within the community, underscoring the importance of addressing inequalities to foster harmony and inclusivity.

Excerpt 7:

There are loads of inequalities...Like, when it comes to jobs and education, especially getting into local universities for further studies. Us non-Bumiputeras, we often feel like we’re not getting a fair shake, especially with job opportunities. It seems like Bumiputeras always get first dibs. (P3)

Another point of concern is the failure of financial assistance to reach those who are underprivileged. P2 made it clear in Excerpt 8 that the benefits of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in Malaysia seem to have been diverted towards Bumiputera politicians, leading to their enrichment rather than the empowerment of Bumiputera entrepreneurs. This diversion of resources away from the intended beneficiaries is seen as a misuse or abuse of the policy implementation that can potentially undermine the effectiveness of government initiatives and diminish public confidence in addressing socioeconomic disparities, thus exacerbating social disharmony.

Excerpt 8:

but unfortunately, it didn't go to them. If ... actually the new economic policy, if the financial [assistance] is given properly, it's given to the, let's say Bumiputera entrepreneur, that is good. Unfortunately, the new economic policy enriches Bumiputera politicians, it didn't enrich the Bumiputera entrepreneur. ... The policy to me is logical, under the context of building for more harmonious society and more equitable society but the implementation is abused. (P2)

Nevertheless, despite the dissatisfaction of all the three participants with the current state of ethnic relations, the interview results show the unifying power of sports in Malaysia. To P2, events such as the Thomas Cup in badminton and football matches unite people under the banner of Malaysia. Through sports events, individuals from diverse backgrounds find common ground and feel their oneness as Malaysians. They temporarily forget their ethnic backgrounds and cheer the national sports people who represent their country. Indeed sports can contribute to the strengthening of national cohesion but the potential of sports as a unifying force in Malaysian society has not been used to promote solidarity and bridge societal divides.

Excerpt 9:

You can see that Malaysian under any racial banner will cheer the Malaysia badminton team when we played the Thomas cup, others sport including football, even inter-regional, inter provincial football in Malaysia itself, you see people unite under the banner of their state, their region rather than race and if they play against, if we play against Singapore, the Malaysian Chinese, I don't think they support Singaporeans, they support the Malaysian tigers. I always see in sports. (P2)

Sarawak appears to have less ethnic polarisation compared to Peninsular Malaysia. One tangible evidence is the coexistence of food stalls operated by various ethnic groups. Chinese and Muslim vendors operate their stalls side by side, even when the Chinese stalls serve non-halal food. As emphasised by P3 in Excerpt 10, this practice reflects a spirit of mutual respect and tolerance rarely seen in Peninsular Malaysia. This could be due to the characteristics of the Sarawak population, where no one ethnic group has a leading majority in numerical dominance.

Excerpt 10:

I think in Sarawak only, you can see at the coffee shop, different ethnic groups like Malay, Iban, Chinese...each offering their own delicious cultural cuisines to attract many people from different ethnic groups to come. So, you can see people in Sarawak are living together harmoniously. (P3)

iii. Views on the topics that are often connected with race

All of the three Chinese participants believe that there is a prevalent connection between religion and race in Malaysia. P2 is saddened by the association of Islam with Malays, and Christianity with Sarawak indigenous and, to some extent, Chinese. He believed that religion should not be tied to race, and emphasised that religions like Islam and Christianity are meant to be inclusive of all ethnicities. While Malay are Muslims by decree of the Malaysian Constitution, Islam is also embraced by Chinese, Indians and Indigenous. Similarly, there is also a mix of ethnicities among Christians. Similarly, P1 also shared the view that religion is often closely connected with race. She raised concerns about the phenomenon of conversions, particularly highlighting the practice of Islamising non-Muslim individuals through educational avenues (Excerpt 11). This practice, she emphasised, not only raises questions about religious freedom but also underscores the complex dynamics between race and religion in Malaysia. P1's comments suggest that in specific contexts, converted Chinese Muslims encounter significant societal pressure to adopt Malay cultural norms. This pressure may be so pervasive that they feel compelled to entirely forsake their own cultural heritage.

Excerpt 11:

In some areas...the pressure for converted Chinese Muslims to assimilate into Malay culture can be quite intense, sometimes to the point where they're expected to forsake their own cultural heritage entirely. (P1).

P2 believes that race is a convenient and potent tool for political manipulation in Malaysia, and is used to stir up emotions, particularly during elections to win votes, as illustrated in Excerpt 12.

Excerpt 12:

because race is still a very easy target, easy weapon, some articles I read, they said that Malaysian politician, they like to weaponise race for their own political advantage and over the years this has been used, and even more so now for the simple reason because there are position groups uses race as a trump card to win votes. (P2)

Undoubtedly, race is a crucial factor in Malaysia's political landscape. The race card is used to mobilise voters and influence public opinion, thereby impacting the course of governance and policymaking.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The study on the perspective of Chinese on ethnic dynamics shows openness to ethnic diversity at a personal level and experiences of ethnic tension at the national level. The openness to ethnic diversity for the three Chinese participants is linked to their personal background which enabled them to develop close relationships with various ethnic groups. They go to national primary schools, and had classmates from different ethnic groups. They and their parents work in the civil service, and had the practice of visiting the homes of people from different ethnic groups during festivals. They studied abroad, and developed a sense of oneness with other Malaysians living in a foreign land. Family plays a crucial role in shaping children's acceptance and appreciation of diversity (Dalege & Degner, 2013; Duda, 2016; Hughes et al., 2006; Ting, 2002). The present findings underscore the crucial role played by parents in fostering a positive outlook towards diverse cultures and backgrounds, contributing to the promotion of social cohesion and harmony within communities. Undoubtedly, the closer friends may still be from the same ethnic group (Lee, 2017; Mohd Tamring et al., 2020; Ting et al., 2024) but it is a

positive sign for the Malaysian society that there are Chinese people who move in interethnic circles. Greater familiarity with other ethnic groups can reduce prejudice and stereotypes.

Another reason that promotes openness to ethnic diversity is having mixed ancestry, like the case of P2. This is because living together with family members from other ethnic groups dispels stereotypes, and fosters a spirit of accommodation, which extends beyond family members to the wider community. The close contact with people from other ethnic groups in family and friendship circles is possibly more effective than university courses on ethnic relations such as *Hubungan Etnik* (see Jawan & Ahmad, 2006) or even the Malaysian National Service Programme (Al Ramiah et al., 2014). Having said that, these structured programmes may bring some interethnic contact into the lives of people who usually mix with people from their own ethnic group, and hopefully sow the seeds of interethnic friendships. In fact, public universities is a good ground for interethnic contact. Researchers have found high cross-cultural tolerance among university students in Malaysia (e.g., Lino & Mohd Hashim, 2020; Masrukhin & Sriyanto, 2022; Yaacob et al., 2019) although the ingroup preference is still strong in the broader Malaysian society (Aminuddin, 2020; Chin et al., 2015).

At the national level, the findings indicate negative ethnic dynamics as the Chinese participants talked more about manifestations of ethnic tension rather than ethnic integration. The Chinese participants interviewed in the present study did not report personal encounters with inequality but were aware of such incidents happening around them. The participants were concerned about the potential for local incidents to escalate into ethnic conflicts that attract interest throughout the nation. A recent example of race-and-religious issues is the controversy surrounding the “Allah” (reference to God in Islam) socks sold in KK Mart, which ignited strong emotions and became politicised across the country (Kamarulzaman, 2024). Five pairs of socks sold in KK Mart had the word “Allah” printed on it. The incident is religious but the incident took on ethnic overtones as the KK Mart owner is a Chinese, and Malays are Muslims. The issue grew in proportion with politicians and netizens making statements about it. The KK Mart owner has been charged for wounding the religious feelings of Muslims. In the wake of the KK Mart incident, police reports were filed about a line of the Vern’s women’s shoes which have a stylised logo engraved on the soles that is said to look like Arabic calligraphy for God (Azmi, 2024). At the back of the minds of Malaysians is the 13 May 1969 racial riots between the Malay and the Chinese which resulted in bloodshed. The government and concerned individuals try their best to prevent a repeat. This is why it is very treacherous for politicians to exploit the interconnectedness of race, religion and royalty (3R). These elements are frequently used as political weapons to mobilise support, manipulate public sentiment, and gain electoral advantage in pursuit of political interests (Bernama, 2023; Rajandran & Lee, 2023). The dividing of social identities among Malaysians reflect the “us” and “them” mentalities (Rajandran & Lee, 2023).

However, when Malaysians are outside of the country and among citizens of different countries, the “us” (my ethnic group) vis-à-vis “them” (other ethnic group) mentality changes. Outside of Malaysia, the notion of “us” expands to include all Malaysians and “them” refers to non-Malaysians. The findings exemplify the importance of the societal context in influencing the “us” and “them” mentality. Based on the Social Identity Theory, people emphasise shared characteristics with their in-group to bolster self-esteem and belonging (McLeod, 2023).

Malaysians do not have to be out of their country to share the oneness (“us”) as Malaysians. Ethnic integration at the national level is possible, based on the perspective of the three Chinese participants. They cited inter-country sports and ethnically diverse coffee shops as tangible

evidence of racial harmony. During international sports events, the spirit of unity among Malaysians comes to the fore when the Malaysian team plays against other countries. The national flag on the sports uniform and the national anthem Negaraku (if the team is champion) are icons that further reinforce the sense of solidarity and pride as Malaysians. These sports events serve as powerful reminders of the shared identity and collective pride that go beyond ethnic divisions. Another noteworthy example of unity in Malaysia is evident in Sarawak's coffee shops, where food stalls selling both halal and non-halal foods coexist harmoniously side by side. This practice underscores the spirit of inclusivity and acceptance among different ethnic and religious communities in the region. The findings of the present study indicate that although participants may have dissatisfaction with ethnic relations at national level, these may be pockets within generally neutral to positive experiences in ethnic relations.

The study produced a model of ethnic dynamics at both personal and national levels based on the Chinese perspective. However, the findings are based on a case study of three participants with a particular profile (Chinese ethnicity, attended national primary school, and employed in the civil service sector). Hence, the model needs to be verified through further research on Malaysians from various socio-economic backgrounds, geographic regions, age groups, ethnicities, residences (urban versus rural), education levels, and religious backgrounds. The present study did not investigate the Chinese participants' perspective on equal rights of minority groups to financial assistance, education, and employment. The awareness of entitlements can influence attitudes towards ethnic relations (Muslim et al., 2011, 2012). In fact, some researchers noted that affirmative action and preferential policies may contribute towards ethnic dissent in Malaysia (Ationg et al., 2018; Lee, 2017). Another area for future investigation is the perspective of majority and minority groups on loci of dissatisfaction in ethnic relations such as exclusion from economic opportunities, discrimination, and marginalisation that may cause conflicts to break out. Knowing the hot spots of ethnic dissent will provide valuable empirical data for timely interventions to build an inclusive and cohesive society.

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