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

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### **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.

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## 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:

- (1) What are the levels of ethnic identity in terms of ethnic identity achievement, ethnic behaviour, affirmation and belonging, and other-group orientation?
- (2) How do demographic characteristics influence the strength of ethnic identity?

The study will indicate the outcomes of the national integration agenda in terms of the Chinese ethnic identity vis-à-vis intergroup orientation in the context of assimilation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Chinese Identity

The Chinese diaspora is said to have a high degree of maintenance of identity outside of China over more than a century despite experiencing an intersection of cultures. The people who carry the label “Chinese” share some cultural traditions but the nature of being Chinese differs with the place they live in (Tan, 1988). “A Chinese is one who identifies himself or herself as Chinese and claims to be ethnically of Chinese origin” (Tan, 1988, p. 139). Besides the ethnic label, in Tan’s (1988) view, the other two components of Chinese ethnic identity are objective aspects (particularly language and customs), and the subjective experiences of being Chinese. Tan’s (1988) definition of Chinese identity is consistent with Phinney’s (1996) definition of ethnic identity as “a commitment and sense of belonging to one’s ethnic group, positive evaluation of the group, interest in and knowledge about the group [subjective experiences], and involvement in activities and traditions of the group [objective aspects]” (p. 145). Phinney (1996) also emphasises the importance of self-identification of ethnicity in research on ethnic identity.

Researchers have investigated ethnic labels for Chinese identity. In Indonesia, many ethnic Chinese have opted to use Indonesian-sounding names in order to hide their Chinese identity, but some incorporated their surname into their children’s Indonesian name. For example, the surname “Hong” can appear in their daughter’s name as “Angela” because “Ang” is the Chinese Hokkien pronunciation for the colour “red”, whereas “Hong” is the Mandarin pronunciation. The Chinese constitute about 3-4% of the Indonesian population and during the Suharto regime,

they were made to acculturate because Chineseness was constructed as incompatible with the Indonesian national identity (Tan, 2001). During the Suharto regime, Chinese language and culture were prohibited but “Chinese identities were never totally wiped out” (Heryanto, 1998, p. 104). The situation is changing because many young Chinese living in Indonesia are eager to forgo their Chinese identity and be accepted as full-fledged members of Indonesian society although the full Indonesian identity is only available to members of indigenous ethnic groups (Heidhues, 1996).

In Malaysia, the Chinese are a minority group with a population of 22.8%; the Malay and the indigenous make up 69.3% of the 32.6 million Malaysian population (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2020). There is no overt political pressure for the Chinese living in Malaysia to adopt the dominant *bumiputera* culture (“sons of the land”, referring to the Malay and indigenous), unlike Indonesia. However, some key events have strengthened ethnic solidarity among the Chinese. The 13 May 1969 racial riot made the Chinese realise that the Malay resented their domination of the economy and the power-sharing bargain negotiated prior to the Malayan independence did not work (Tan, 2001). The Chinese, including English-educated Chinese parents, reacted by enrolling their children in Chinese vernacular schools (“Chinese schools”, henceforth). The Chinese school enrolment spiked further when English-medium primary schools were replaced with Malay-medium primary schools and by the late 1970s, 90% of Chinese parents had enrolled their children in Chinese schools (Raman & Tan, 2015; see also Lee, Ting, & Lo, 2017). Tan (2001) identified Islamic revivalism as another factor that threatens the Chinese because putting Islam as the core of the *bumiputera* identity further excludes the Chinese non-Muslims. Crouch (2001) stated that emphasis on the Malay culture as the basis of the national culture made “many non-Malays feel that they were no more than second-class citizens” (p. 243). As Carstens (2005) put it, “being labelled Chinese [in Malaysia] on one’s identity card still meant restricted opportunities for certain types of business, employment, and education” (p. 202). As the dominance of the *bumiputera* increases, ethnic minority groups will feel

more threatened, heightening ingroup solidarity and reducing intergroup tolerance.

Research has shown that the Chinese in Malaysia have sought to maintain their Chinese identity. They have lived alongside the Malay and the indigenous people without much mingling of cultures, fitting Furnivall's (2014) description of a plural society where "distinct social orders live side by side, but separately, within the same political unit" (p. xv). The three pillars of the Chinese community that defend Chinese identity are the Chinese media, Chinese schools, and Chinese organisations (Gill, 2009). Chinese parents enrol their children in Chinese schools so that they can learn Mandarin and develop a better appreciation of Chinese culture – and indirectly, have a stronger Chinese identity (Ho, Chew, & Thock, 2018; Lee, Ting, & Lo, 2017; Ting & Lee, 2019). The informal environment in Chinese schools socialises children into Chinese culture (Lee & Ting, 2016a) and the success can be seen in the stronger Chinese identity of Chinese who are Chinese-educated, compared to Chinese who are English- and Malay-educated (Lee & Ting, 2015). However, when the strength of Chinese identity is compared with other ethnic groups, it is actually lower. For instance, Granhemat and Abdullah (2017) reported that a majority (59.3%) of Malaysian Chinese university students have moderately strong ethnic identity while 20.4% have a strong ethnic identity and another 20.4% have a weak ethnic identity. Similarly, Ting and Rose (2014) found that the Chinese adolescents have a moderate level of ethnic identity ( $M=2.90$ ), whereas the Malay ( $M=3.05$ ) and Indigenous adolescents ( $M=3.16$ ) are strong in their ethnic identity. Nordin et al.'s (2018) survey showed that while the Malay students are in favour of other cultures assimilating to the Malay culture while the Chinese and Indian students prefer the multiple identities model that is akin to a plural society.

## 2.2. The Current Study

The theoretical framework of this study was Phinney's (1989) developmental model of ethnic identity which categorises ethnic identity into four statuses based on Marcia's (1966) model of ego identity formation: diffuse identity, foreclosed identity,

moratorium, and identity achieved. The following explanation is based on Phinney, Jacoby, and Silva (2007). Individuals with a diffuse identity status have not engaged in exploration of and commitment to their ethnic identity. Their interest and understanding of their ethnicity are low. They do not feel proud of their ethnic group membership. A foreclosed identity is one where individuals profess a commitment to their ethnic identity without exploration. They are proud of their sense of belonging in the ethnic group, but their views are influenced by their parents and other authority figures. They have not questioned the meaning of this group membership for themselves. Moratorium is the stage when individuals are engaged in exploration without commitment. They make an effort to learn about and understand their ethnicity, but are either unclear or ambivalent about belonging to the group. Individuals with an identity achieved status have undergone both exploration and commitment. They have given enough thought to the implications of their ethnic group membership, and are clear about what it means to belong to the group.

Exploration and commitment are distinct but related processes which individuals experience as they move from a diffuse identity to an identity achieved state. Exploration involves learning about one's group and its implications for one's life, whereas commitment refers to a decision regarding the meaning of one's ethnicity and the way one will live as a group member (Phinney et al., 2007). Individuals who are committed to their ethnic identity are secure about their attachment to their ethnic group and can openly discuss intergroup relations such as them joining another group and vice versa (Phinney & Tarver, 1988).

Phinney's (1992) Multiethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) can assess ethnic identity across diverse ethnic groups. Three sub-scales measure ethnic identity (ethnic behaviour, affirmation and belonging, and ethnic identity achievement). On the other hand, the fourth sub-scale, other-group orientation, measures intergroup attitudes. Individuals who are not mature in their ethnic identity may feel angry with the outgroup (Phinney, 1996), reject their friendship, hate their own ethnic group, and they may even want to become members of the outgroup (Phinney, 1989). Phinney (1989)

found that Asian-American tenth graders are more likely to express the desire to belong to a different ethnic group than their Black and Hispanic peers. From ambivalence about their group belonging, individuals proceed to developing a confident sense of themselves as members of their ethnic group and become open to other ethnic groups. These contribute to their psychological well-being, which is important for individuals living in ethnically diverse societies and where they are a minority group under covert or overt pressure to assimilate into the majority group.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

Considering that there are different models of being Chinese even within the Chinese group

(Tan, 1988), this descriptive study focused on one Chinese dialect group, that is, the Foochow Chinese. The study was conducted in Sibul, Sarawak where the Foochow is the dominant Chinese dialectal group (Chew, 1990). Sarawak is an East Malaysian state located on the Borneo Kalimantan Island. Foochow is the largest Chinese dialect group in Sarawak, accounting for 37.47% of the Chinese population of 560,150 in Sarawak (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2014). This is based on the 2010 population census. The selection criteria were that the respondents had to be Foochow and one of their parents who was also Foochow had to participate in the study. Data were collected from 504 Foochow respondents (252 parents; 252 children).

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 504)*

Demographic characteristic		Parents (n=252)	Students (n=252)	
		%	%	
Gender	Female	70.52	67.86	
	Male	29.48	32.14	
Medium of instruction	Kindergarten	Malay	5.05	0.85
		Chinese	83.33	97.86
		English	11.62	1.28
	Primary school	Malay	8.47	16.40
		Chinese	78.23	83.20
		English	13.31	0.40
	Secondary school	Malay	29.46	70.28
		Chinese	30.36	22.09
		English	40.18	7.63
	University	Malay	0	0.80
		Chinese	0	13.25
		English	100.00	85.94
Father's education level	Primary 6 or lower	32.21	14.23	
	Form 3	37.66	36.82	
	Form 5	22.59	32.64	
	Form 6 or Diploma	5.44	10.46	
	University	2.09	5.86	
Mother's education level	Primary 6 or lower	35.25	15.93	
	Form 3	36.07	32.24	
	Form 5	23.36	38.78	
	Form 6 or Diploma	3.69	11.02	
	University	1.64	2.04	
Parents' monthly income	Less than RM2000		49.15	
	RM2000-RM3999		38.89	
	RM4000-RM5999		6.84	
	RM6000-RM7999		3.85	
	More than RM8000		1.28	

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the parent and student respondents. A majority of them had been living in Sibul since they were born (76.59% parents, 89.29% students). Others had lived in neighbouring Foochow-dominant towns like Bintangor and Sarikei. The parents' average age was 48.74 (range: 37-65) and the students' average age was 20.10 (range: 18-38). There were more female than male respondents. A majority of respondents attended Chinese-medium kindergartens and primary schools. Among the parents, almost equal percentages had their secondary education in Malay, Chinese, and English but among the students, a majority had their secondary education in Malay. In the parents' generation, university education was available only in English, but 13.25% of students had their university education with Chinese as the language of instruction. Most (88.04%) of the students came from homes where their parents earned less than RM4000 per month (approximately USD900 at an exchange rate of 1USD = RM4.44).

### 3.2. Instrument

The questionnaire to measure ethnic identity was adapted from Phinney (1992), which had 20 four-point Likert type items: ethnic identity achievement (7 items), ethnic behaviour (2 items), affirmation and belonging (5 items), and other-group orientation (6 items). The scale ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". This study employed Ting and Rose's (2014) adapted questionnaire with four additional items on language behaviour because language is an ethnic identity marker in Malaysia (Ting & Campbell, 2013; Ting & Ooi, 2014). The Cronbach Alpha value was 0.765, showing the internal consistency of the questionnaire. Information on the respondents' medium of education was also obtained because previous studies (e.g., Lee et al., 2017) have found that educational background influences the strength of Chinese identity.

### 3.3. Data Collection

The data were collected from students enrolled in diploma courses at a private college in Sibul (accounting, business, computer science, and early childhood education). The second researcher explained the purpose of the study on ethnic identity. She invited them and one of their parents to participate in the study. They

were told that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. They were also assured of the confidentiality of their identity in reports arising from the study. Those who agreed to participate in the study signed a consent form and took home the questionnaires to fill in. The items were similar in the parent and student versions, with the exception of these two items which were only found in the student questionnaire: their parents' monthly income, and whether they were living with their grandparents. The presence of grandparents has been observed to encourage the use of the ethnic language, which is linked to ethnic identity but in this study, this factor was later found to be non-significant. Altogether, 514 questionnaires (257 students; 257 parents) were returned and five pairs of incomplete questionnaires were eliminated, leaving 504 questionnaires for the analysis.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

For the data analysis, mean scores were computed for the four components of the ethnic identity. For ethnic identity achievement, mean scores were calculated for ethnic identity exploration (4 items) and commitment (3 items) and the combined ethnic identity achievement. Mean scores for students and parents were compared to find the differences and correlations in their ethnic identity. In addition, two-tailed paired t-tests of difference were run to find out the influence of several variables on the respondents' ethnic identity: gender, socio-economic status, and educational background. Socio-economic status was categorised into low status (115 students with parental monthly incomes below RM2000) and middle to high status (137 students with parental monthly income above RM2000). RM2000 was taken as an indicator of lower socio-economic status because in Malaysia, one needs to have a monthly income of at least RM2300 to be subject to annual taxation. As for educational background, Chinese-educated respondents were defined as those who had primary school education in Chinese, following the common understanding in Malaysia (Lee & Ting, 2016b).

## 4. Results

To make the family relationship clear, the respondents are referred to as “parents” and “children” in the description of results. “Foochow respondents” refers to both groups of respondents.

### 4.1. Ethnic Identity of Foochow Parents and their Children

The t-tests showed significant differences between the parents and their children on all four components of the ethnic identity and overall ethnic identity (Table 2). The mean

scores show that the children’s ethnic identity was lower than their parents’ overall ethnic identity. The results were the same for each of the four components. Pearson correlation test showed a moderate association between the ethnic identity of the parents and their children ( $r=0.473$ ,  $p<.05$ ). The Foochow respondents’ ingroup orientation and intergroup orientation were similar, at a moderate level (mean score between 2 and 3). For both groups, the mean scores were the highest on affirmation and belonging and the lowest on ethnic identity achievement. The results of the ethnic identity components are described next.

**Table 2**

*Comparison of Mean Scores of Parent and Student Respondents on Components of Ethnic Identity (N = 504)*

	Ethnic identity component	Parent		Student		t-test results
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Ingroup orientation	Ethnic identity achievement	2.75	0.80	2.58	0.77	$P=0.000$
	- Exploration	2.63	0.80	2.46	0.76	$P=0.000$
	- Commitment	2.90	0.76	2.74	0.76	$P=0.000$
	Ethnic behaviour	2.86	0.93	2.74	0.89	$P=0.000$
	Affirmation and belonging	3.21	0.76	3.12	0.78	$P=0.000$
	<i>Ingroup orientation</i>	<i>2.91</i>	<i>0.86</i>	<i>2.78</i>	<i>0.85</i>	<i><math>P=0.000</math></i>
Intergroup orientation	<i>Other-group orientation</i>	<i>2.90</i>	<i>0.86</i>	<i>2.78</i>	<i>0.90</i>	<i><math>P=0.000</math></i>
	Overall	2.91	0.86	2.78	0.86	$P=0.000$

*Note.* On a four-point Likert scale, mean scores above 2.5 indicate positive attitudes.

Table 3 shows that the parents had higher mean scores on their ethnic identity achievement than their children for all seven items, indicating that they had a clearer sense of what their ethnicity means. More parents explored their ethnic identity, compared to their children. The exploration was in the form of talking with other people about their ethnic group and ethnic background ( $M=2.74$ ), and

finding out more about the history and customs of their ethnic group ( $M=2.73$ ). In comparison, their children were neutral ( $M=2.50$  and  $M=2.51$  respectively). However, both parents ( $M=2.44$ ) and their children ( $M=2.39$ ) disagreed that they thought a lot about how their life would be affected by belonging to their ethnic group. They may take their ethnicity for granted.

**Table 3**

*Mean Scores of Parent and Student Respondents on Ethnic Identity (N = 504)*

Ethnic identity components and items		Parent (N = 252)	Student (N = 252)
<b>Ethnic identity achievement - Exploration dimension</b>			
1.	In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group.	2.74	2.50
2.	I have spent time trying to find out more about my own ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.	2.73	2.51
3.	I really have not spent much time trying to learn more about the culture and history of my ethnic group. * (Reversed: I have spent time trying to learn more about the culture and history of my ethnic group)	2.61	2.42
4.	I think a lot about how my life will be affected by belonging to my ethnic group.	2.44	2.39

<b>Ethnic identity achievement - Commitment dimension</b>			
5.	I understand quite well what my ethnic group membership means to me, in terms of how to relate to my own group and other groups.	2.92	2.78
6.	I am not very clear about the role of my ethnicity in my life. * (Reversed: I am very clear about the role of my ethnicity in my life)	2.90	2.78
7.	I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means to me.	2.88	2.66
<b>Ethnic behaviour</b>			
8.	I speak my ethnic language whenever I can with people from my ethnic group.	3.35	3.12
9.	I often talk with older family members during family events such as weddings and festivals.	3.30	2.82
10.	I try to speak my language to show that I belong to my ethnic group.	3.04	3.04
11.	I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs.	2.99	2.93
12.	I am active in organisations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group.	2.58	2.48
13.	I don't feel comfortable when I am with people from other ethnic groups.	1.87	2.02
<b>Affirmation and Belonging</b>			
14.	I am happy that I belong to my ethnic group.	3.48	3.55
15.	I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background.	3.26	3.17
16.	I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.	3.14	2.89
17.	I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.	3.00	2.83
18.	I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group and its achievements.	2.18	3.17
<b>Other-group orientation</b>			
19.	I don't try to become friends with people from other ethnic groups. * (Reversed: I try to become friends with people from other ethnic groups)	3.29	3.33
20.	I sometimes feel it would be better if different ethnic groups didn't try to mix together. * (Reversed: I sometimes feel it would be better if different ethnic groups tried to mix together)	3.26	3.14
21.	I like meeting and getting to know people from other ethnic groups.	2.93	2.92
22.	I am involved in activities with people from other ethnic groups.	2.81	2.66
23.	I enjoy being around people from other ethnic groups.	2.70	2.51
24.	I often spend time with people from other ethnic groups.	2.41	2.11

*Note.* The respondents' responses for the negatively worded items were reversed during data input. Here the positively worded items are put in brackets to show what the mean scores reflect.

Interestingly, the respondents had higher mean scores on ethnic identity commitment than exploration. Despite not having extensively explored their ethnic identity, the Foochow respondents were committed to their ethnic identity. The results showed that the parents were more certain on the meaning of their ethnicity and the way they live as a group member (mean score between 2.88 and 2.92) than their children (mean score between 2.66 and 2.78). They understood quite well what their ethnic group membership meant to them, and were somewhat clear about the role of their ethnicity in their life, in terms of how to relate to their own group and other groups. In other words, the parents were closer to the ethnic identity achieved state than their children.

Table 3 shows that the parents displayed stronger ethnic behaviour than their children. The Foochow respondents spoke their ethnic

language whenever they could with other Foochow people (parents,  $M = 3.35$ ; children,  $M = 3.12$ ), mainly to show that they belonged to their ethnic group ( $M = 3.04$  for both groups). These results reiterate language as an ethnic identity marker for the Chinese. Consistent with the earlier results on exploration, the parents were more likely to talk with older family members during family events ( $M = 3.30$ ) than their children ( $M = 2.82$ ). The generation gap could have made it harder for the children to have common topics of conversation with their older relatives. The parents ( $M = 2.99$ ) were more likely to participate in cultural practices of their own group than their children ( $M = 2.93$ ). Typical Foochow food includes *kong pia* (a type of bun), and *so mieng* and *kampua* (noodles). The Foochow also has different customs for births, marriages and funerals compared to other Chinese dialect groups. As for Foochow



music, Foochow operas and entertainment were valued by the generation that migrated from China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and most of them have passed away. The parents participated minimally in Chinese-based organisations ( $M=2.58$ ), but their children showed little interest ( $M=2.48$ ). Examples of Foochow-based organisations which are valued by Foochow people in their seventies and eighties are Foochow associations and clans based on the surname (e.g., Ting clan, Tiong clan, Wong clan). The younger Foochow people are likely to speak the Foochow dialect and take Foochow food, but are not interested in cultural activities of their ethnic group.

The high mean scores for affirmation and belonging indicate that the Foochow respondents were committed to being Foochow. There are interesting differences between the two generations. Their children ( $M = 3.55$ ) were happier about belonging to their ethnic group than their parents ( $M = 3.48$ ). The children also reported more pride in their ethnic group and its achievements than their parents. On the other hand, compared to their children, more parents were inclined to feel good about their cultural background (parents,  $M = 3.26$ ; children,  $M = 3.17$ ), to feel attached to their group (parents,  $M = 3.14$ ; children,  $M = 2.89$ ), and to have a stronger sense of belonging (parents,  $M = 3.00$ ; children,  $M = 2.83$ ). The parents' sense of belonging was derived from their oneness with the Foochow community, but the children's sense of belonging was anchored to pride in the achievements of prominent Foochow people. To sum up, the results on the three sub-scales of ethnic identity show positive ingroup orientation among the Foochow respondents, but this does not imply negative intergroup orientation.

Finally, the results on other-group orientation show positive intergroup behaviour and attitudes among the Foochow respondents. More students ( $M=3.33$ ) tried to become friends with people from other ethnic groups than their parents ( $M=3.29$ ), but more parents felt that it would be better if different ethnic groups tried to mix together (parents,  $M=3.26$ ; children,  $M=3.14$ ). Both groups were similar in their marginally positive responses showing that they liked meeting and getting to know

people from other ethnic groups (parents,  $M=2.93$ ; children,  $M=2.92$ ). However, the students had mixed responses ( $M=2.51$ ) on whether they enjoyed being around people from other ethnic groups, while their parents were a little positive ( $M=2.70$ ). Note that these items focussed on their feelings about interacting with outgroup members. When asked about intergroup behaviour, the results are less positive. Both groups spent little time with people from other ethnic groups, particularly the younger generation (parents,  $M=2.41$ ; children,  $M=2.11$ ). In an ethnically diverse environment, intergroup contact is unavoidable. The parents were more involved in activities with people from other ethnic groups ( $M=2.81$ ) than their children ( $M=2.66$ ), mainly because of their work. Being about only 20 years old, the students had homogenous family and social circles that were largely Chinese and Foochow. The less positive intergroup attitudes could be engendered by the private college they were studying in because it has a largely Chinese student and staff population, unlike public universities which are more ethnically diverse. In Harris and Han's (2019) study of university students, some Malay students said that they had an ethnically segregated school experience, but the public university environment provided the opportunities for them to learn the culture of different ethnic groups. These findings suggest that interpretations of intergroup attitudes need to take into consideration the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, particularly their age and social network.

#### 4.2. Differences of Ethnic Identity by Demographic Characteristic

This section reports the results on the effect of three demographic characteristics on ethnic identity: gender, socio-economic background, and educational background. *T*-tests showed no significant differences in the ethnic identity of respondents who had Chinese-medium education and those who had either English- or Malay-medium education; this was applicable to both groups of respondents.

Gender affected only the Foochow parents' ethnic identity. There were significant gender differences in the parents' ingroup orientation ( $p < .05$ ) and other-group orientation ( $p < .05$ ),

but not for their children. The mean scores showed that fathers ( $M=2.98$ ,  $SD=0.86$ ) had a slightly stronger ingroup orientation than mothers ( $M=2.88$ ,  $SD=0.86$ ). The fathers also had a stronger other-group orientation ( $M=3.03$ ,  $SD=0.83$ ) than the mothers ( $M=2.84$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ). The fathers seemed to have stronger identification with the Foochow community than the mothers, but studies on other cultures have found that a stronger Iranian cultural identity among females (Rezaei & Bahrami, 2019).

There were significant differences between Foochow respondents from low and middle-high socioeconomic backgrounds in their ethnic identity for both parents ( $p<.05$ ) and their children ( $p<.05$ ). The mean scores showed that the Foochow parents from the middle socio-economic background ( $M=2.95$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ) were more likely to feel a stronger ethnic identity than those from the lower socio-economic background ( $M=2.87$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ). Similarly, the students from the middle socio-economic background ( $M=2.78$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ) were more likely to feel a stronger ethnic identity than those from the lower socio-economic background ( $M=2.73$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ).

## 5. Discussion

This study on the Chinese identity of parents and their children among the Foochow Chinese in Sarawak, Malaysia showed moderate levels of ethnic identity in terms of ethnic identity achievement, ethnic behaviour, affirmation and belonging, and other-group orientation. The ingroup and other-group orientation of the Foochow Chinese parents was influenced by gender and socio-economic background. The effect of the socio-economic background on the strength of ethnic identity was also seen on the children.

Firstly, the findings on the foreclosed identity status of the Foochow respondents are discussed. Based on Phinney's (1989) model of ethnic identity, it is expected that the exploration scores may be higher among the children and the commitment scores may be higher among the parents as they move towards the state of ethnic identity achieved. However, ethnic identity achievement is the lowest among the ethnic identity components for both groups. The results on the three sub-

scales of ingroup oriented ethnic identity show high affirmation and belonging, followed by marginally positive ethnic behaviour and ethnic identity achievement. Both parents and children affirmed that they belong to their ethnic group despite the lack of ethnic identity exploration. This may be characteristic of people in Malaysia because similar findings on the strong affirmation and belonging and the marginally positive ethnic identity achievement were obtained by Ting and Rose (2014) when they studied Chinese, Malay, and Indigenous adolescents in Sarawak. In the foreclosed stage, attitudes toward one's group membership tend to be derived from parents or from society rather than reached independently (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Chavira, 1992). It seems that the Foochow respondents may have taken their ethnic identity for granted instead of engaging in deep exploration of the meaning of their ethnic group membership. They have Chinese parentage and, on account of that, they are Chinese. They identify themselves as Chinese on their birth certificate, identity card, passport, and other documents, and their nationality as Malaysians is not questioned. The situation was different for Chinese immigrants living in the post-independence era when they had to apply for Malaysian citizenship. For both the Foochow parents and children in this study, their ancestors migrated from China more than three or four generations ago, and there may be little consciousness of their immigrant past. Despite what other ethnic groups may perceive, transnational relations with China do not affect the identification of the younger Chinese with the Malaysian state (Tan, 2000). In other words, the allegiance of the younger Chinese is to Malaysia, their homeland (*tanahair* in Malay), rather than China. Wang (1988) noted that some younger Chinese are already exploring the option of consciously changing their identities in favour of the new local national identity, seeing the severe tensions created by older Chinese who sought to have the historical Chinese identity officially recognised as an integral part of a composite Malaysian national identity. Young Chinese feel strongly Malaysian but feel constricted within their ethnic identity (Lindstrand, 2016) and engage in discourse on having equal rights with the Malay (Tan, 2000). This is actually a move in the right direction if the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept can materialise. *Bangsa*

*Malaysia* is an attempt by the state to reconcile Malay nationalism and cultural pluralism to create “a supra-ethnic national identity” or a political imagined community centred around Malay as the core group (Ishak, 1999, p. 280).

Secondly, age influenced the overall strength of ethnic identity for the Foochow respondents, which was slightly higher among the parents ( $M=2.91$ ) than the children ( $M=2.78$ ). Other researchers have also found that the Chinese in Malaysia have a moderate level of ethnic identity, lower than other ethnic groups (Granhemat & Abdullah, 2017; Ting & Rose, 2014). The Chinese may not wish to accentuate their ethnic identity because this would reinforce the “internal outsider identity” (Tan, 2001) that sets them apart from other ethnic groups in Malaysia. For the Chinese to be seen as socially integrating with other ethnic groups and embracing the national identity, their ethnic identity has to be downplayed (Awang et al., 2019). The result suggests that ingroup orientation is weaker among the younger Foochow respondents, which is a sign that the cultural distinctiveness of the Chinese may weaken in the future. Ingroup bias is the tendency to view one’s own group more favourably than other groups (Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997). However, it is uncertain how far the future generations of Chinese will go in downplaying their ethnic identity because inevitably the national identity would be attached to Malay identity. Studies like Nordin et al. (2018) showed that non-Malay secondary school students cannot accept the assimilation model and favour the multiple-identity model.

However, it is interesting that ingroup orientation and other-group orientation are not in an inverse relationship. The Foochow respondents have positive other-group orientation, again slightly more positive among the parents ( $M=2.90$ ) than their children ( $M=2.79$ ). Having a moderately strong ingroup orientation does not prevent them from having open and positive intergroup attitudes. In the context of the developmental ethnic identity model, with increasing age, individuals develop the ability to see ethnicity in a wider context, that is, they can adopt the perspective of other ethnic groups and of the dominant ethnic group, and therefore acquire an understanding of intergroup conflict and the

social implications of ethnicity such as prejudice (Phinney et al., 2007). In comparison, the younger Foochow respondents are still studying in a homogeneous private college, and therefore have less exposure to other ethnic groups. With more interaction, tolerance towards other ethnic groups may increase and lead to an appreciation of other cultures. While this may happen, the results show that the parents’ other-group orientation is at a moderate level, and their average age was 48.74. In the context of an ethnically diverse society, the Chinese are open towards interacting with people from other ethnic groups and befriending them; this is the focus of the other-group orientation sub-scale of MEIM. As far as ethnic integration is concerned, social acceptance of other ethnic groups is only the beginning and it is a superficial investigation of intergroup relations. Cultural appreciation, cultural adaptation and ethnic compromising are the subsequent steps towards national integration (Awang et al., 2019), but these are not examined in the other-group orientation sub-scale of MEIM. Thus, in the present study, it seems as if positive other-group orientation can co-exist with ingroup orientation, but this is because both are at a moderate level. It is plausible that a strong ingroup orientation is incompatible with a strong other-group orientation. The latter entails practising some aspects of another culture and making concessions which may be detrimental to one’s own ethnic group, and this is at odds with ingroup solidarity and bias. The relationship between ingroup orientation and other-group orientation should be more closely examined in future studies on ethnic identity.

Further on the influence of demographic characteristics on the strength of ethnic identity, an unexpected result was obtained on the non-significant effect of Chinese educational background on ethnic identity. Extant findings show that the Chinese-educated Chinese have a stronger Chinese identity than English-educated Chinese, and they display more ethnic behaviours characteristic of Chinese such as speaking Chinese, having a Chinese name, and celebrating Chinese festivals (Lee & Ting, 2016a). They also engage in a greater exploration of their Chinese ethnicity although the resolution and affirmation dimensions of

their ethnic identity are similar to the English-educated parents. Lee and Ting (2016a) measured ethnic identity using Umana-Taylor and Shin's (2007) Ethnic Identity Scale which examined ingroup orientation, but not other-group orientation. Nonetheless, some researchers have found that Chinese education does not affect intergroup relations. Holst (2012) investigated whether Chinese educational background affected university students' perceptions of how easy it was to become friends with Malays and found no difference between Chinese students who went to Chinese- and Malay-medium schools. Using MEIM-Revised, Lundell, Subramaniam, and Ling (2019) found similar ethnic identity achievement scores for Chinese students studying in an ethnically diverse public university and a Chinese-dominant private university. At this point, the findings are inconsistent on whether the Chinese-educated Chinese have stronger ingroup orientation than Chinese who are not Chinese-educated, suggesting that further research is needed to find out the role of Chinese schools in instilling Chinese identity. The findings will be of significance in the context of managing national building and ethnicity.

The demographic characteristic that seems to have the strongest influence on ethnic identity is socio-economic status. Significant effects of socio-economic background on the ingroup and other-group orientations were found for both Foochow parents and their children. Those with middle and high socioeconomic status have higher ingroup orientation and other-group orientation scores than those with low socioeconomic status. Holst's (2012) survey also showed that Malay university students from higher socio-economic backgrounds and bigger hometowns have better inter-group friendship relations. However, a mixture of findings was obtained in the United States. There is no relationship between ethnic identity and social class among high school students (Phinney, 1989) and college students (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). Phinney and Chavira (1992) who conducted a longitudinal study reported that changes in ethnic identity stages are not related to ethnic group, socioeconomic status or gender. On the other hand, Phinney (1992) found that ethnic identity differences related to socioeconomic status are not statistically significant for the

college students, but are significant for the high school students, and students whose parents are unskilled workers have the lowest scores. More studies have shown no link between ethnic identity and socioeconomic status; however, the present study is similar to Phinney (1992) in showing that individuals with lower socioeconomic status tend to have lower scores for ethnic identity than those with middle-high socioeconomic status, possibly due to different access to education or social exposure. In Malaysia, socio-economic status is largely dependent on the educational level which determines the job and the earning power, with the exception of business owners whose income is variable. The effects of socio-economic background on ethnic identity need to be teased apart through stratified sampling to better understand the demographic correlates of ingroup solidarity and intergroup relations.

This study has revealed that ingroup orientation and other-group orientation can co-exist when the overall ethnic identity of the minority ethnic group is at a moderate level and that there is a weakening of ethnic identity from the parents to the children's generation. Other researchers have also found a moderate level of ethnic identity among the younger Chinese in Malaysia and that other ethnic groups have much stronger ethnic identities (Granhemat & Abdullah, 2017; Ting & Rose, 2014). The implication of these findings is that assimilation is probably taking place among the younger Chinese in Malaysia, and an early sign of this is the weakening of ingroup orientation. This development in ethnic relations is not surprising and concurs with Awang et al. (2019) and Rahim (2018); however, the situation is fragile because once the Chinese feel threatened, they may retreat into heightened cultural distinctiveness and the ground gained in positive intergroup tolerance will be lost. In the Malaysian context, factors that can trigger this include Islamic revivalism (Tan, 2001), over-emphasis on the Malay culture (Crouch, 2001), and a threat to the status of Chinese schools. The finding that the Chinese have a foreclosed identity also means that the Chinese may be susceptible to the influence of Chinese media and Chinese organisations, two of the three pillars of Chinese identity (the other being Chinese schools). However, it is possible that when an

individual's ethnic identity is threatened, this would spur exploration of ethnicity, which may lead them towards an identity achieved status. The cross-sectional design of the present study limits the findings to a measure of ethnic identity in two generations at one point in time. Future research tracing changes in ingroup and other-group orientations in situations when ethnic identity is questioned or negotiated such as in intermarriage and discriminatory situations will advance knowledge in the ethnic identity formation of ethnic groups living with covert or overt pressure to assimilate into majority cultures.

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