Explore the Relationship between Malaysian Chinese Cultural Identity and Chinese Learning Anxiety

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Abstract. Malaysia is a bilingual and multicultural society in which the Chinese play an important role. Despite their lengthy history and preserved culture in Malaysia, Chinese students are frequently neglected in educational systems, resulting in identity problems and language learning anxiety. The object of this study is to explore the current state of language anxiety among Malaysian Chinese when Chinese is the traditional language (CHL), as well as the relationship between this feeling and cultural identity. This study used a mixed methods research design to collect data from 52 participants at Xiamen University Malaysia, including surveys using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and the Cultural Identity Scale (CIS), as well as in-depth online interviews with 4 students. The results of study revealed that: (1) Malaysian Chinese CHL has lower level of learning anxiety (M = 2.07, SD = 0.81). (2) It has the weak association between cultural identification and learning anxiety (Pearson correlation = -0.252). This implies that other motivational variables may influence anxiety levels. This demonstrates the complicated interrelationships between language proficiency, cultural identification, and learning anxiety in Malaysian Chinese traditional language learning, and it inspires Malaysian Chinese to recognize and embrace their distinct language and culture. (3) According to interviews, part of participants think that cultural identity affects Chinese learning anxiety by influencing learners' learning motivation.

Keywords: Cultural Identity; Language Learning Anxiety; South Eastern Aisa.

1   Introduction

Malaysia is home to individuals of diverse races, beliefs, and ethnicities. Malaysia's largest ethnic group comprises of three races: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. As a result of the multiethnic heritage, the society is multilingual, with distinct ethnicities speaking Bahasa Melayu (Malay), English, several Chinese dialects, Tamil, and Punjabi [1].

According to the principal statistics of population by the Malaysia Department of Statistics, Chinese are the second-largest ethnic group and account for 22.6% of the population in 2023 [2]. They mostly speak Chinese with Mandarin, Teochew, and Hakka being important dialects. Despite not being officially recognized by the government, these Chinese dialects are extensively spoken, with millions communicating in Hokkien, Cantonese, and other dialects [3].

The history of the Chinese in Malaysia dates back to the 15th century, evolving from early traders to established populations by the 19th century [4]. These ethnic groups have maintained their languages and traditions, preserving Chinese as a heritage language in Malaysia's changing social and political landscape. Malaysian policies, on the other hand, frequently favor the Malay majority, affirmatively implementing action for Bumiputera while disadvantageously affecting the Chinese, particularly in the educational sector. The non-recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) confines Chinese students to private schooling, effectively limiting opportunities for Chinese education [5] [6].

This predicament has led to an identity crisis among Malaysian Chinese: a struggle between staying true to their Chinese roots and feeling fully Malaysian. The issue is exacerbated by language learning anxiety, common to both heritage and foreign language learners, marked by fears of making errors and the pressure to meet expectations [7]. Heritage language (HL) learners face additional stress related to their cultural identity, stemming from educational methods, societal expectations, and identity clashes [8] [9].

2   Literature Review

2.1   Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a complex area of interest in applied linguistics and educational psychology that results in language learning and communication complications. It's realized that many studies have been based on FLA. The FLA was first set forward by Horwitz et al. [10] as "a complex mixture of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors of non-proficient language learners functioning in the foreign language class". This early understanding related FLA to the internal experience of the learner as well as to the external process of language acquisition.

There are numerous research that demonstrate the causes and effects of FLA from a variety of perspectives. Horwitz et al. [10] identified several key causes of language anxiety, including dread of speaking, test anxiety, and fear of unfavorable judgment. They highlight speaking anxiety since it is intimately tied to social contact while learning a language. Some researchers highlighted that the main factors related to Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) includes communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, along with other pragmatic challenges such as a small vocabulary and fear of errors [11]. FLA also has negative impacts on the academic performance of foreign language learning [12]. Such anxiety is also found to be predicted more significantly by individual factors rather than by environmental factors [13]. Regarding the impact of FLA, MacIntyre [14] investigated how anxiety impacts language

acquisition, concluding that it interrupts learning at all stages: receiving information, processing information, and generating language. Anxiety can distract students, making it difficult to concentrate on learning tasks. Li and Wei [15] stated that more longitudinal research is needed to better understand the long-term consequences of anxiety on achievements in language learning.

Horwitz et al.[10] established the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in 1986 to assess FLA. For this purpose, a 33-item scale was found to measure different aspects of FLA as well as its impact on learning. A simpler version—having only ten components—is also recommended to measure the same dimensions.

Recent studies have looked at several factors that influence FLA, including the use of online learning platforms, learning environments, and learner characteristics. For example, online language learning may assist in lower anxiety when compared to traditional classroom settings [16]. Furthermore, feeling comfortable about speaking multiple languages versus just one lowers FLA, implying that increased language exposure and competence foster confidence while decreasing fear [17]. Furthermore, FLA levels were associated with motivational type, sentiments of competence, and autonomy. Intrinsic desire and a sense of control can help reduce anxiety [18].

2.2   Heritage Language Learning (HLL) and its Learning Anxiety

Heritage language learning (HLL) is a unique topic in the context of bilingual and multilingual education. HLL refers to people who speak a language that is not their native tongue but holds personal, family, or historical significance. Heritage language learners are people who inherit a language different than the primary one in a family either know or speak that language and are bilingual or multilingual [19].

The term "heritage language" itself has been known by many names, including "home language," "ancestral language," and "community language" [20]. This variability illustrates the multifaceted nature of heritage languages, which intersect with identity, culture, and social dynamics. Heritage languages are frequently highlighted in contexts of high immigration, such as the United States and Canada, and play an important role in cultural identity [19].

Heritage language learners typically come from a background in which the heritage language is spoken to some level. They may not be as fluent as their parents or classmates in their native language, but they will have basic knowledge [21] [22]. This is in contrast to foreign language learners who begin learning a completely new language from scratch. Aside from that, "heritage language" refers to both indigenous and immigrant languages other than the dominant language in a given place [20]. It indicates that HLL incorporates immigrant and indigenous languages into personal and community identity.

Individual differences, family history, community support, motivation, and attitudes have all been investigated as factors influencing heritage learning anxiety by researchers [19]. These characteristics demonstrate the complex nature of HLL, which is heavily based on social and cultural practices rather than merely formal schooling, as well as the emotional aspect of language learning, which is especially significant in HLL due to its connections to identity and legacy.

2.3   Chinese as a Heritage Language (CHL) and its Learning Anxiety

Chinese is widely studied as a Heritage Language (CHL), especially among ethnic Chinese, Chinese immigrants, and abroad Chinese. This learning encompasses numerous Chinese dialects learned in local areas outside of China, identifying it as a heritage language [19]. He [23] and Montrul [21] defined CHL as early exposure to a heritage language in family circumstances, followed by an adult desire to study or improve their linguistic abilities. This viewpoint highlights CHL learners' ethnolinguistic and minority status, situating their education within a larger sociocultural and identity-affirming context.

Recent CHL research has taken numerous approaches, including identity difficulties, the impact of dialect backgrounds, and the link between home background knowledge and learning results. Xiao [24] compares heritage and non-heritage learners and concludes that heritage learners outperform non-heritage learners in sentence formulation and advanced grammar knowledge. Wong and Xiao [25] investigate identity concerns among Mandarin learners from varied Chinese dialect origins, demonstrating nuances in their language identity and engagement. Shen and Jiang [26] highlights a distinct correlation between the academic achievement levels in Chinese of participants and their aspirations towards Chinese literacy and identity among the second-generation Chinese-Australian children. Smith and Li [27] reveal motivational dynamics in CHL maintenance, demonstrating a positive relationship between the ideal heritage language self and learning effort among Chinese-American children.

In Malaysia, CHL research focuses on the whole educational scene and pedagogical practices, with less emphasis on learning motivation [19]. There are insights into language maintenance and shifts, such as the impact of religious activities on language preservation and the significance of Mandarin education in maintaining Malaysian Chinese identity [20]. Recent research on middle-aged Chinese Malaysians has revealed that the older generation of Chinese Malaysians retains their traditional philosophy of valuing their Chinese identity in multilingual Malaysia [5]. Furthermore, methodologically, there is a noticeable lack of empirical research, with studies frequently depending on historical analyses, language policy evaluations, and case studies.

Current research lacks focus on traditional language learning in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, especially for youth groups and the learning anxiety associated with learning Chinese as a traditional language (CHL). Furthermore, existing research tends to focus more on the outcomes of learning rather than understanding the causes of these anxieties.

At the same time, the impact of cultural identification on learners' anxiety experiences has received little attention. There is a scarcity of empirical research in this field that investigates the causes of learning anxiety and its impact on the learning process. Additionally, the literature on learning in CHL frequently emphasizes learning motivation learning over anxiety.

Based on the overall, this paper presents the following research questions:

(1) What is the current situation of Malaysian Chinese learning anxiety?

(2) What's the correlation between Malaysian Chinese cultural identity and Chinese learning anxiety?

(3) How does learners' cultural identity affect Chinese learning anxiety?

The goal of our research is to investigate HL learning anxiety among Malaysian Chinese and its relationship to cultural identity. Learning Chinese is more than just learning language skills; it is also about identification, validation, and expression of one's cultural identity. Understanding the relationship between their learning anxiety and cultural identification will be crucial to assisting this population in preserving their language and history.

3   Research Design

3.1   Participants

The study's sample consisted of students aged 19 to 24 from Xiamen University in Malaysia. The sample distribution included 12 males, 35 females, and 5 people who decided not to declare their gender. All of the study's participants were from a variety of fields, ranging from foundation courses to commerce and majoring in Artificial Intelligence, and they all reported no learning disabilities. This was accomplished by giving questionnaires via Microsoft Forms, with a random sample mechanism used to ensure that the chosen population of students was represented.

Between January 23 and February 1, data were acquired via WeChat, Instagram, and Microsoft Teams. A total of 52 valid responses are collected for analysis. Specific background information about participants is in Table 1.

Besides the questionnaires, the subset of the four students was further probed through interviews. The interviews were done through video calls and averaged 10 minutes per session.

Table 1. The number of different background information of participants (N=52)

Back-ground	Gender			Nationality		Use Chinese or not		Language type of use (Chinese/English/Malay)		
	Male	Female	Not to say	Malaysia	Others	Yes	No	Unilingual	Bilingual	Trilingual
Number	12	35	5	45	7	44	1	22	12	18

3.2   Research Tool

The study combined quantitative and qualitative research. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Cultural Identity Scale (CIS) are included, both of them on a 5-degree Likert scale from strongly disagree (1 point) to strongly agree (5 points). The higher the score, the greater the learner's level of learning anxiety and the higher the cultural identity of the learner.

FLCAS is adopted from Botes et al. [28]. It has 8 items. No.4 and No.5 is reverse scoring question. CIS is adopted from Huang & Bi [29]. It has 9 items in 2 dimension, affective commitment and behavioral commitment.

The FLCAS in this study had a good reliability of degrees (Cronbach α = .885) and the CIS had a good reliability of degrees (Cronbach α = .925).

Four interviewers took part in online interview to answer following questions:

(1) How do you learn Chinese? What is your purpose of learning Chinese?

(2) How does your identification with Chinese culture affect your language learning?

(3) Does a higher sense of cultural identity increase your motivation to learn Chinese? If not, how do you think cultural identity affects your anxiety about learning Chinese?

(4) What do you think is the relationship between cultural identity and language learning anxiety?

(5) Do you have any personal stories you would like to share about cultural identity and language learning?

The content of interview was collected by transcription of recording into about 5900 words. Import the interview data into Nvivo14. Based on the method of Grounded Theory, three levels of text coding are carried out: open coding, associative coding and core coding [30]. SPSS26.0 and Nvivo14 are used for data analysis.

3.3   Data Collection and Analysis

3.3.1 Descriptive Analysis

In the background information, subjects rated themselves on Chinese proficiency from unskilled (1 point) to proficient (5 points). The average score is 4.13 which showed subjects perceived their Chinese proficiency in a high level.

3.3.2 Differential Analysis

In the analysis of variance, there is no significant difference between males and females in Chinese learning anxiety, cultural identity and its two dimensions as shown in Table 2. In addition, there is also no significant difference between learners of different language use in Chinese learning anxiety, cultural identity and its two dimensions as shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Differential Analysis of Gender in Chinese Learning Anxiety, Cultural Identity and Its Dimensions (N=47)

Variable	Gender	M±SD	t	p
Learning anxiety	Male	2.24±0.98	0.88	0.383
	Female	1.99±0.78		
Cultural identity	Male	4.01±0.72	-0.31	0.756
	Female	4.08±0.61		
Affective commitment	Male	3.93±0.73	-0.84	0.407
	Female	4.11±0.62		
Behavioral commitment	Male	4.10±0.82	0.31	0.756
	Female	4.03±0.69		

*At the 0.05 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant.

**At the 0.01 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant.

Table 3. Differential analysis between the types of language used in learners' learning anxiety, cultural identity, and its dimensions (N=52)

	Learning anxiety	Cultural identity	Affective commitment	Behavioral commitment
	M±SD	M±SD	M±SD	M±SD
Unilingual	1.88±0.59	4.04±0.72	4.09±0.67	3.97±0.89
Bilingual	2.31±0.86	3.75±0.62	3.71±0.59	3.79±0.73
Trilingual	2.14±0.98	4.06±0.66	4.08±0.71	4.03±0.62
F	1.223	0.872	1.395	0.347

3.4   Correlation Analysis

In the correlation analysis, learners' Chinese proficiency showed a significant negative correlation with Chinese learning anxiety ($p < 0.01$). Learners' Chinese proficiency was positively correlated with cultural identity and its two dimensions ($p < 0.01$). Jee's study shows that Korean Australians language proficiency had significant correlations with cultural identity [31]. The Pearson's correlation coefficient between learners' anxiety about learning Chinese and cultural identity and its dimensions is less than 0.3, showing a weak correlation. Specific results are showed in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlation Analysis of Language Type of Use, Chinese Proficiency with Chinese Anxiety, Cultural Identity and its Dimensions (N=52)

	M±SD	Chinese proficiency	Chinese Learning anxiety	Cultural identity	Affective commitment	Behavioral commitment
Chinese proficiency	4.13±1.05	1.000	-0.507**	0.437**	0.454**	0.371**
Chinese learning anxiety	2.07±0.81		1.000	-0.252	-0.225	-0.222
Cultural identity	3.98±0.68			1.000	0.953**	0.942**
Affective commitment	4.00±0.68				1.000	0.797**
Behavioral commitment	3.95±0.76					1.000

*At the 0.05 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant.

**At the 0.01 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant.

3.5   Qualitative Analysis Results

In the open coding, original material was extracted to the key words as notes sentence by sentence, and each of note contains one or more data reference sentence. For example, the interviewee said, 'My way of learning Chinese is the course in school from

kindergarten to middle school.' This answer is about the way to learn Chinese. The key word extracted from this sentence is "school learning". In this way, this study extracted 25 nodes in all. After further abstract summary of concepts through the association coding, the core coding is now shown in Figure 1.
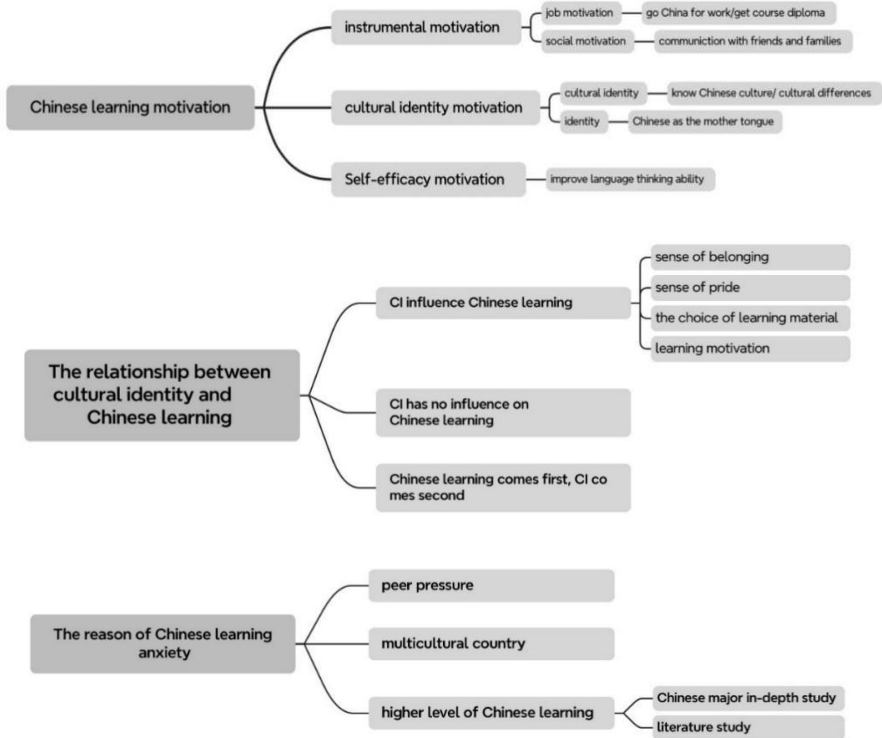

Fig. 1. The results of the core coding

4   Results and Discussion

4.1   Chinese Learning Anxiety of Malaysian Chinese

The level of Chinese language anxiety among Malaysian Chinese is relatively low (M=2.07, S=0.81). This can be attributed to various factors within the cultural context and interviewers' major. Firstly, in a multicultural nation like Malaysia, Chinese is used for daily life communication to maintain the relationship of families and friends. In addition, one of the learners' parents is native language learner. Parental encouragement is the important motivation for learner's language learning [32]. Especially on the education of the heritage language, parental involvement is extensive [33]. Secondly, a majority of the interviewees are students specializing in Chinese studies. They chose this major because of their advantages in learning Chinese and their curiosity about traditional culture. Therefore, they have a low degree of Chinese learning anxiety. The

result can be also found in the interview. The respondents had a low level of Chinese learning anxiety. The main source of anxiety is peer pressure.

In terms of gender differences, there are no significant differences in Chinese learning anxiety, cultural identity, affective commitment and behavioral commitment. But on the average score, the degree of Chinese learning anxiety in males (M=2.24, S= 0.98) was higher than that in females (M=1.99, S= 0.78). Yousefi & Abedini's study also shows people's gender has no significant correlation with intercultural identity [34].

In the overall and its dimension of CIS, the degree of females' cultural identity and affective commitment are higher than male's. However, the degree of female's behavioral commitment is lower, which is related to male and female's rational and emotional processing styles.

In the analysis of differences in the types of language use, bilingual and trilingual people have higher Chinese learning anxiety than monolingual people. Most of the literature does not make a distinction between bilinguals and trilingual. The reason of the higher Chinese learning anxiety of multilingual learners maybe due to the effect of inter-language transfer. Bi/multilingual children also showed negative emotions towards heritage language [35]. However, this study they didn't make comparison with monolinguals. In the survey of cultural identity, bilinguals have the lowest degree of cultural identity. In dimension of affective commitment and behavioral commitment, bilinguals also have the lowest degree of cultural identity.

The cultural identity of bilinguals is not stronger than that of single users. It is speculated that learners gradually identify with the culture behind the language when they acquire the language, and their thoughts are more inclined to cultural diversity. It can be known that when learners acquire language, they gradually identify with the culture behind the language, and their thoughts are more inclined to cultural diversity. Therefore, the degree of bilingual's cultural identity is less than monolingual.

4.2   The correlation of Malaysian Chinese Cultural Identity and Chinese Learning Anxiety

There is no significant correlation between learners' cultural identity and Chinese learning anxiety. They only show the weak correlation. The author speculates that cultural identity affects Chinese learning anxiety by influencing learners' learning motivation. In the interview, learners' learning motivation includes cultural identity motivation, and learning motivation is also mentioned in the causes of Chinese learning anxiety. Learning motivation will reduce Chinese learning anxiety.

Another finding of interview shows that there is a negative correlation between Chinese proficiency and learning anxiety. It means that the higher Chinese proficiency learner has the lower degree of learner's learning anxiety he has. The result also corroborates the findings of Xu et al. [36] study, but their study is for the online learning. However, the difference is that in this study, the Chinese proficiency is self-rated by the subjects. What's more, there is a significant positive correlation between learners' Chinese proficiency and cultural identity which means the higher learners' Chinese level, the higher their cultural identity.

4.3 The effects of Cultural Identity on Chinese learning anxiety among Malaysian Chinese

The types of Malaysian Chinese learning motivation includes instrumental motivation, cultural identity motivation and self-efficacy motivation. Firstly, instrumental motivation includes work development motivation, such as learners are willing to go for China to work and study, and learning in order to obtain a course diploma. Instrumental motivation also includes social motivation which means learners want to communicate with classmates and family members in Chinese. Secondly, cultural identity motivation includes cultural identity and identity. Cultural identity means that learners are interested in Chinese culture and the cultural differences between China and Malaysia. Identity refers to that most learners think Chinese is their native language and they are Chinese, so they should learn Chinese. Thirdly, self-efficacy motivation mainly includes the improvement of language thinking ability, for example, some learners have interests to learn more to enhance their knowledge. Others like to explore the corresponding thinking mode behind the language.

In the relationship between cultural identity and Chinese learning, the respondents have three attitudes. Some people believe that cultural identity affects Chinese learning, including the sense of belonging and pride brought by cultural identity to Chinese learning. It also includes the choice of learning materials and the influence of cultural identity on learning motivation. Cultural identity motivation was also mentioned in the above learning motivation. Sun's [37] study indicates that cultural identity education can reduce learner's learning anxiety in English teaching class. Students in the Department of Chinese are also educated in cultural identity at school. This approach is influencing them subtly. Other people think that the cultural identity of learners will not affect the motivation or even the anxiety of Chinese learning. There is a different idea from the above two. One of interviewees believes that Chinese language learning comes first and cultural identity comes second. The author believes that the relationship between the two is dynamic.

The Chinese learning anxiety of the subjects in this study mainly stems from the multilingual background of the learners, whose Chinese learning is not in-depth, and they feel peer pressure when communicating with native Chinese speakers. Wang et al. [38] shows that learners of Chinese as a foreign language are more anxious when chatting with native speakers than non-native speakers. And in the higher level of Chinese learning, for example, when the in-depth understanding of literary works and professional requirements for Chinese learning. The reason for the anxiety is that they are afraid of failing in a more difficult course. This factor was mentioned in Jeong & Lee's[39] study. Their study analyzed the reason of Korean students' classroom learning anxiety. However, in general, the level of Chinese learning anxiety in Malaysia is low. One of the interviewee mentioned that in the era of developed Internet media, most people use the similar words and phrase on the Internet which narrows the gap with the native speaker. This can be explored further more in the study of modern technology and Chinese learning anxiety.

5   Conclusion

This paper explores the relationship between Chinese learning anxiety and cultural identity of Malaysian Chinese CHL. Through the combination of quantitative and qualitative research, it is found that the level of Chinese anxiety in Malaysian Chinese is low. It is mainly due to peer pressure and high-level Chinese learning. There is a weak correlation between learners' cultural identity and Chinese learning anxiety. But learners' cultural identity affects learners' learning motivation, which in turn affects learners' Chinese learning anxiety.

  The limitation of this paper include the variety of the participants, most of which are Chinese majors. In further research, the following aspects can be explored. Researcher can increase the variety of participants not only about the major but also the age. For instance, children in the critical period of second language learning can be as participants. In the type of academic emotion respect, further study can integrates positive psychology to explore more positive emotion about Heritage Language learning. What's more, in learning media respect, future directions should explore how network media or AI influence academic emotions of learners Heritage Language learning. Additionally, local school should make efforts to alleviate peer pressure in learning Chinese by promoting exchange programs with local Chinese.

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