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## Intergenerational Transmission of Chinese Foochow: Exploring a Connection between Family Language Policy and Language-Ethnicity Dimensions

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### Abstract

This study examines intergenerational transmission of Chinese Foochow in Sarawak, Malaysia by exploring a connection between family language policy and language-ethnicity dimensions. The specific aspects examined were: (a) family language practices; (b) family language ideology in defining characteristics of being a Foochow; and (c) family language attitudes towards heritage language management. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with nine Foochow ethnic families (29 participants) from urban Sarawak, Malaysia. The findings showed the Foochow dialect was mainly spoken at the highest level of the family hierarchy with the lowest level shifting to use standard languages (Mandarin and/or English). The nine families held strong beliefs regarding their ethnic identity being passed down by birth, blood, and descent and thus, not being able to speak Foochow did not subtract from their Foochow ethnicity. Some participants defined themselves as Foochow because they practised Foochow customs and ate Foochow food, indicative of the phenomenological dimension of the language-ethnicity link. As the dialect is predicted to lose its role and status in urban settings, various strategies for managing Foochow which attributed agency to others were provided by the participants. The findings suggested that attributing ethnic identity to paternity and not patrimony will lead to potential loss of Foochow from the linguistic repertoire of the youngest generation in urban localities in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** family language policy, language-ethnicity, paternity, Foochow, Malaysia

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## Introduction

The family domain is crucial for heritage language transmission to children. A heritage language is “a language of personal relevance other than English” in the United States (Fishman, 1999, as cited in Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003, p. 216). Leeman and King (2015) broadened the definition of heritage languages to mean languages other than the national language(s). The family domain becomes a natural boundary against external pressure to use the national language and other standard languages taught in the education system (Fishman, 1991). The youngest generation’s proficiency in the heritage language is a strong indicator of the vitality, or conversely the endangerment, of the language in question (Lewis & Simons, 2010). Within the family domain, children’s language ecology is in fact the ecology of their language use, which is influenced by family members. In turn, the social and cultural setting shapes the children’s language acquisition and development.

Recent studies in Malaysia found a spread of Mandarin as the family language (Carstens, 2018; Ong & Troyer, Forthcoming; Wang, 2010, 2015), resulting in diminished roles for Chinese heritage languages among the Hokkien (Ting & Teng, 2021), Hakka (Ding & Goh, 2017; Ting, 2018; Vollman & Soon, 2020), and Foochow (Ting & Ting, 2021). Chinese heritage languages in this paper refer to the Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainan, and Foochow, spoken by the various Chinese dialect groups in Malaysia. These languages have little institutional support and literacy status because they are mostly spoken (Vollmann & Soon, 2020). Because of this, intergenerational transmission is crucial to ensure the survival of these languages.

For example, Ting and Teng (2021) reveals that the vitality of Hokkien in Penang is at Level 6b (Threatened) because it has lost its role as a trade language and is now reduced to a home language due to fierce competition from Mandarin. Their findings show that while a majority of teenagers in Penang are still able to speak Hokkien, it is likely that less than 20% of these teenagers’ future children and grandchildren will transmit Hokkien to their offspring. Ting and Teng’s assessment of the vitality of Hokkien lent support to Churchman’s (2017) prediction that Hokkien would die by 2050s. Malaysian university students of Chinese descent even consider Mandarin as more necessary economic tool than Malay, the national and official language of Malaysia (Albury, 2021).

Thus far, language shift patterns have been explained in terms of the pull factors

of standard languages, which have greater instrumental value than heritage languages (Albury, 2017, 2021; Ong & Ben Said, Forthcoming). English has the revered status as an international language, providing access to tertiary education and international economic opportunities. Ong and Ben Said (Forthcoming) also found that mixed marriage is a potent condition for language shift because parents originating from different Chinese dialectal groups do not have a common heritage language, and have chosen Mandarin as the family language to unite family members. However, Pua and Ting (2017) have explained the language shift in terms of the paternity-patrimony dimension of language-ethnicity. They attributed the shift to weak adherence to the patrimony dimension of ethnicity among the Foochow, causing Foochow families to place less value on speaking Foochow than Hokkien families. Hokkien is still frequently spoken outside the family domain, largely in the friendship and transactions domains because of the Hokkien's stronger belief in the patrimony dimension of ethnicity, where the language is a marker of ethnic group membership. The beliefs on language and ethnicity could influence family language practices.

As children are the target of heritage language transmission and are crucial in the future vitality of heritage languages, it is important to focus on the agency of children in family language practices. Children starting school is an important linguistic event in the family as they may drop use of their heritage language in favour of the school language. Doyle (2013) reported that the older children in Tallinn, Estonia were responsible for their continued acquisition and development of non-Estonian languages. Smith-Christmas (2017) asserted the importance of studying child agency because family language policy is not simply a top-down process but an evolving co-construction between caregiver and older children, which in turn influences, shapes, and impacts the language policy of the respective family. Few studies to date have incorporated both parents' and older children's perspectives. Thus, there needs to be a more thorough understanding of how parental language engagement and ideology influence older children's language engagement and ideology because they seem to be considerably affected by their parents (Schwartz, 2010).

In this paper, we show that connecting Fishman's (1977) dimensions of language-ethnicity relationship to the language ideology component of King et al.'s (2008) family language policy offers new perspectives on the shift happening to Chinese heritage languages in Malaysia. This study examined the intergenerational transmission of Foochow in Sarawak, Malaysia by exploring a connection between

family language policy and language-ethnicity dimensions. The specific aspects investigated were:

1. language practices of grandparents, parents, and children;
2. their language ideology in defining their characteristics of being a Foochow; and
3. their language attitudes towards heritage language management.

## 1. Literature Review

Two theoretical frameworks were employed in this study, namely, Fishman's (1977) dimension of language-ethnicity relationship and King et al.'s (2008) family language policy.

Fishman (1977) conceptualises the relationship between language and ethnicity as three dimensions: paternity, patrimony, and phenomenology. Ethnicity refers to a state of belonging to a social group that shares culture, language, kinship, or ancestral origins, so that they can carry on the responsibility of intergenerational cultural continuity (Fishman, 1989). According to Fishman (1989), ethnicity is closely linked to language at every stage, whether indexically (paternity), implementationally (patrimony), or symbolically (phenomenology).

In the first dimension of paternity, ethnicity is said to deal with "the recognition of putative biological origins" (Fishman, 1977, p. 17) and therefore, ethnicity is passed on from generation to generation, reflecting the values and traditions of an ethnic group. Ethnicity is experienced as coming "with the blood if not through it" (Gambino, 1975, as cited in Fishman, 1977, p. 18). In other words, language is treated as a birth-ascribed characteristic that is inherited. An example of the paternity dimension is the Canadian-born Chinese adolescents seeing themselves as Chinese despite lacking proficiency in the Chinese language and immersion in the dominant English and French-Canadian culture (Wang, 2016). They only retained the beliefs and values of Chinese culture.

The second dimension of patrimony is related to how ethnic collectives behave and what their members do to express their membership. They use language to claim group membership and economic and political benefits associated with it (Jones, 1997). In Malaysia, the Malay community views language as the core of their ethnic identity. This is evidenced in Article 160 of the Federal Constitution, which defines a Malay as "a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, [and] conforms to Malay customs" (Malaysia Legal

Research Board, 1997, p. 198).

The third dimension of phenomenology is related to the subjective interpretation and meanings that people attach to their descent-related being (paternity) and behaving (patrimony). Any symbol can be interpreted and reinterpreted to convey their ethnic identity, depending on their beliefs, expectations, and aspirations. As De Vos and Romanucci-Ross (1975, p. 388) put it, ethnicity is “the ‘cup of custom’ (patrimony) passed on by one’s parents (paternity), from which one drinks the meaning of existence ... through which one envisions life (phenomenology). It is both a means and an end.”

The second theoretical framework used in this study is family language policy which is based on Spolsky’s (2004, 2009) language policy framework. King et al. (2008) explain that family language policy seeks to understand the interdependencies of family language practices (what they do with languages they know), language ideology (what they believe about the languages), and language management strategies (how they maintain those languages within the family). Each family usually sets its own policies of speaking certain languages to align with the parents’ goals for their children’s language acquisition and development. Parental ideologies play a role in influencing their children’s language acquisition and development and consequently, may or may not “provide continuity for intergenerational transmission and resistance to language shift” (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013, p. 3). Some parents may also apply their growing up experiences when implementing those policies so that the goals can be achieved.

Early research on family language policy concentrated on addressing psycholinguistic questions about children’s language development. For example, De Houwer (1990) examined the early morphosyntactic development of a child who was exposed to two languages (Dutch and English) simultaneously from birth and found that the child’s language closely resembled her monolingual peers in both languages. She concluded that her data pointed to the language-specific nature of morphosyntactic development process. Employing a sociolinguistic and discourse analytical approach, Lanza (1997) demonstrated that language mixing of children before the age of three is contextually sensitive and parental strategies shaped the children’s language outcomes.

From Spolsky’s (2004) micro-level viewpoint, parents act as children’s agent to determine which language(s) to speak in the family domain and the reasons for the

specific language(s) to be chosen, but recent research has brought child agency to light. For example, Bergroth and Palviainen (2017) found the nine Finnish-Swedish bilingual children they studied acted as language policy agents in Swedish-medium preschools in Finland. Based on her analysis of two conversational excerpts of two families in Ireland, Smith-Christmas (2021) showed that the language practices of children are shaped by, and they in turn shape, their parents' language practices, over time and space. Both studies demonstrate that children are active agents in influencing their parents to engage with specific language practices (Luykx, 2003).

Their actions and linguistic choices, performed in conversations, are a result of their identity, culture, environment, and language (Said & Zhu, 2019), which, in turn, is an essential component of family language policy. As Hua and Li (2016) state, individuals of different generations within the same family may have different sociocultural experiences, thus influencing the language policy within the family. Parents and grandparents serve as experts in scaffolding the knowledge of heritage languages but are novice learners of standard languages. Children, on the other hand, are trendy users of standard languages.

## 2. Method of Study

This study took place in Kuching, the capital state of Sarawak in East Malaysia. Participants were selected using criterion-based sampling to meet the selection criteria so that information-rich cases could be obtained (Patton, 2002). Two selection criteria that must be met by participants were: (a) one of the parents must be of Foochow origin, and (b) Foochow must be spoken by one of the three generations of grandparents, parents, and children. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 29 members of nine Foochow families (4 grandparents, 14 parents, and 11 children).

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of the Nine Foochow Families*

Family	Participant	Initial	Age	Language Repertoire
1	Father	F1F	58	Foochow, Hokkien, Mandarin, English, Malay
	Mother	F1M	53	Foochow, Hokkien, English, Mandarin, Malay
	Daughter	F1D	32	Mandarin, English, Foochow, Hokkien, Hakka
2	Father	F2F	49	Foochow, Hokkien, English, Mandarin, Malay
	Daughter	F2D	22	Mandarin, English, Foochow, Hokkien, Malay

Family	Participant	Initial	Age	Language Repertoire
3	Father	F3F	53	Foochow, Teochew, Hokkien, Mandarin, Malay
	Mother	F3M	52	Hokkien, Foochow, Hakka, Mandarin, English, Malay
	Son	F3S	32	Foochow, Hokkien, Mandarin, English, Malay
4	Grandmother	F4GM	67	Foochow, Hokkien
	Father	F4F	41	Foochow, English, Mandarin
	Mother	F4M	39	Foochow, Mandarin
5	Grandfather	F5GF	69	Foochow, Cantonese, Mandarin, Malay
	Father	F5F	46	Foochow, Hokkien, Mandarin, Hakka
	Son	F5S	14	Mandarin, English, Malay, Hokkien
6	Grandmother	F6GM	60	Foochow, Hokkien, Mandarin, English
	Father	F6F	35	Hokkien, Foochow, English, Malay
	Mother	F6M	32	Hokkien, Foochow, English
	Son	F6S	11	English, Mandarin, Malay, Foochow
7	Father	F7F	48	Hakka, Hokkien, Foochow, English, Mandarin, Malay
	Mother	F7M	43	Hokkien, Foochow, Hakka, English, Malay, Mandarin
	Son	F7S	14	English, Mandarin, Malay, Hakka, Hokkien
8	Mother	F8M	40	Hokkien, Mandarin, English, Malay
	Son	F8S	13	English, Mandarin, Malay, Foochow
9	Grandfather	F9GF	77	Hokkien, Mandarin, Malay
	Father	F9F	53	Hokkien, Foochow, Teochew, English, Mandarin, Malay
	Daughter 1	F9D1	32	English, Foochow, Mandarin, Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay, Japanese
	Daughter 2	F9D2	25	English, Hokkien, Mandarin, Malay
	Daughter 3	F9D3	23	English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Malay
	Son	F9S	18	English, Hokkien, Malay, Mandarin

\*Note: For the codes, F1 to F9 refer to Family 1 to 9. The next two places signify the generation. GF and GM denote grandfather and grandmother respectively. F and M denote father and mother respectively while S denotes sons and D1 to D3 denote daughters.

The data were collected using a published semi-structured interview guide (Ting & Sussex, 2002), which is about language choice in multiethnic settings. Hence, further validation of the questions was not carried out. The main questions in the interview were as follows:

1. What languages do you speak to your family? (Ask about language used with different generations in the family)
2. What are the reasons to your language choice?
3. In your opinion, how important is it to pass on your heritage language to the next generation?

4. What makes you a Foochow? (Ask about identity markers such as language, parentage, food, and so on)

For the data collection, potential participants identified based on the selection criteria were contacted by a research assistant. The participants were asked if they were willing to participate in the study. They were informed of the purpose of the study, confidentiality of data, and voluntary participation. Upon agreeing to be interviewed, the participants signed a consent form. The interview took place at the participant's office or house to ensure clear audio recordings and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. The language used for the interview depended on the participants' choice; some preferred to be interviewed in Mandarin while others used English.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed with partial transcription as pauses and sounds such as "um" and "ah" were not included in the transcript. There were no corrections apart from several morphosyntactic features for the sake of intelligibility. Interviews in Mandarin were translated into English for ease of analysis. The participants' responses to the interview questions were analysed according to the three aspects of family language policy (Spolsky, 2004, 2009), which were language use, language ideology, and language management. For the language ideology, analysis based on Fishman's (1977) dimensions of language-ethnicity relationship was conducted. References to surname and parentage were coded as paternity whereas expressions such as using the language to show that they are Foochow were categorised as patrimony. Other symbols of ethnicity that were not language such as cuisine, celebration of festivals, and customary practices were categorised as phenomenology.

Deductive coding was conducted based on definitions of the constructs in the two theoretical frameworks. The researchers were open to other possible elaborations of these concepts. As the constructs in the two frameworks were clearly delineated, there were no issues with different interpretations of the meanings expressed by the participants. Hence, inter-coder reliability was not computed. The only part of the analysis that was amended after discussion between the two researchers was to take note of the period of the participants' life in which the views and experiences were applicable (e.g., before they went to school, after they went to school, when they were in university, after they started working). Finally, the responses for participants from the same family were compared across generations to find out whether parents and children reported the same views and



experiences on language choices, and eventually to determine the generation that had greater agency in the family language policy.

## 4. Findings

The findings on the three aspects of family language policy and dimensions of language-ethnicity relationship are presented first before the connection between the two are explored.

### 4.1. Family Language Practices

A general trend was observed across the nine families. Grandparents who were the highest of the family hierarchy spoke mainly Foochow. The four grandparents were born as second generation Foochows in Sibü. Their parents migrated from the same province in China, and spoke Foochow. In 1900s, Wong Nai Siong bought over 1,000 Foochow clansmen to work in Sibü, a coastal town in Sarawak. They assisted one another with accommodation, finance and food. Later many of them moved to Kuching for better work opportunities such as starting their own coffee shops. They spoke Foochow with family, Foochow friends, church members, and neighbours. F4GM said that she only spoke Foochow to her family to pass it on:

*Because I want them [grandchildren] to learn. We [family members] have used Foochow to communicate since young. I don't want the language to be lost, I want to pass it on. (F4GM)*

Additionally, she did not have proper education in Mandarin or English, which hindered her from speaking those standard languages. However, for work purposes, the grandparents had to learn Hokkien to communicate with customers and colleagues who did not understand Foochow because Kuching is a Hokkien-dominant city. For example, F5GF mentioned that he even picked up Cantonese because he had to deal with Cantonese speaking customers in Kuching but forgot much of it when he retired.

Parents spoke Foochow and Hokkien alongside Mandarin and/or English. The parents had better education, and could speak Mandarin and English. They spoke mainly Foochow with their parents and relatives because their parents were used to speaking Foochow but none of them spoke only Foochow with their children. Three parents code-switched between Foochow and Mandarin because “*Mandarin is so*

common now” (F4M). This couple wanted to ensure that their children did not lose their heritage language and yet follow the “common” trend of speaking Mandarin. Three other parents shifted to speaking English with their children, as shown in F6M’s extract:

*Since young, I mean from baby, I speak to my children in English although I sent them to Chinese[-medium] school. I want them to learn Mandarin and Malay there. I want them to speak English at home and in school, they speak Mandarin.* (F6M)

F6M explained that English is an important international language which her children needed to master. In a way, she was raising her children as multilingual speakers. Her husband (F9F) shifted to Hokkien after moving from Sibu to Kuching, and subsequently adopted Hokkien as his second heritage language. He spoke to his children in Hokkien instead of Foochow, alongside English, resulting in his children perceiving Hokkien as their *de facto* heritage language. *De facto* heritage language means that the language is picked up by a person when living in the particular heritage language community although the person is from a different ethnicity. Outside of the family, Mandarin reigned for the parents. Some parents like F2F used Mandarin with friends and colleagues because they could not speak Chinese dialects other than Foochow:

*I communicate in Mandarin here [Kuching] because I do not know how to speak Hakka. When working, I communicate in English, Mandarin and also Malay.* (F2F)

F1M also encountered a similar situation in the hospital where she worked but she opted for English. At church, she spoke either Foochow or Mandarin depending on whether the church members were Foochow or not.

At the children’s level, which is the lowest of the family hierarchy, only three out of the eleven children interviewed could speak fluent Foochow while the other eight could not speak Foochow. One of the exceptions, F3S, who was in his early 30s at the time of interview, spoke a mix of Foochow and Mandarin with his wife and children after marriage to prevent it from being lost:

*Because our origin is from China and that I wish to pass this dialect [Foochow] to the next generation so that it will not be lost.* (F3S)

F3S was born in Sibu and moved to Kuching with his parents when he was

young. He grew up speaking both Foochow and Hokkien as well as Mandarin. When he married, he decided to continue passing on Foochow to his children. Similarly, F1D was strong in speaking Foochow, with church friends and at work. In her father's company, F1D had to deal with Foochow speaking customers. F2D used to speak Foochow with her grandparents but sadly, after they passed away, she did not have the opportunity to speak Foochow because she spoke Mandarin with her parents and English with her friends.

The other eight children spoke mainly Mandarin and/or English as their everyday language-to-go with a minimum of Foochow and/or Hokkien. After years of growing up or living in Kuching where Hokkien was mainly spoken by the Chinese community, they learnt Hokkien as their *de facto* heritage language. In the interview, F9S said “*My parents speak Hokkien to me. And that is my first language.*”

For other sons like F8S and F5S, English was their first language. But they made allowances for their grandparents and parents who could not speak English:

*In school, I usually speak English. Most of the time, I speak English with my parents and everyone else except for my grandpa and grandma who I speak Mandarin with.* (F8S)

Because they were not fluent in English, F5S spoke Mandarin with his parents and siblings and Hokkien with his grandparents. The only Foochow words F5S learnt were foul words. In Singapore, many of the young generation have considered English as their first language. Consequently, many were trapped between two worlds as they searched for their ethnic identity when speaking English while losing their heritage languages (Cavallaro et al., 2020).

Based on the interview results on family language practices, it seemed that the parents are to be blamed for causing the disappearance of Foochow from the children's generation because they did not insist on speaking Foochow with their children while they continued to speak Foochow with their parents, relatives, and Foochow speaking friends. The grandparents were the only source for the children to have Foochow conversations but when they pass away, the children lose the opportunity to speak Foochow.

The interview results also indicated that the family language practices of the Foochow families were as such not entirely due to parental decisions but macro societal factors which made it hard for them to create a Foochow speaking home

environment for their children. The first factor is that the Foochows were newcomers to Kuching. The Foochow grandparents in this study moved from Sibuhajau to Kuching, where Hokkien was commonly spoken among the Chinese from the 1970s to 1990s. In schools, workplaces, and the transactional domain, Hokkien dominated. As they crossed into the 21st century, Mandarin grew in prominence as a shared language of communication among the Chinese, and the Foochow grandparents did not want to be left out of the trend. F6GM explained:

*Nowadays, everyone is chasing the trend. They feel and hope that their children will excel in English or Mandarin. That is why they speak these languages to them and the result is that Foochow is being forsaken. (F6GM)*

Foochow did not bring academic gains, unlike English or Mandarin. The consequence was that Foochow was abandoned and children could not communicate with their grandparents because the elderly usually did not know Mandarin and English.

The second factor leading to the disuse of Foochow as a family language was the employment of non-Foochow maids to take care of the children when the parents were at work. In the early days, the maids were Chinese from other dialect groups although at the present time, most of them came from Indonesia. F1F explained that his children got used to speaking Mandarin with their maid:

*When I first came to Kuching to work, my wife is Foochow but we employed a maid who was Hakka. None of us could speak Hakka and my maid could not speak Foochow, so we used Mandarin. She also spoke Mandarin with my children. So, at the end, we just continued to use Mandarin. In the past, we did not think of this matter, so we used Mandarin and gradually we became used to it. We never considered that if we did not speak Foochow to our children, they would end up not knowing the dialect. (F1F)*

The third factor pushing out Foochow as the family language is mixed marriages, which is common at the present time. In the past, inter-dialect group marriage was not common because people married within the same dialect group (Wang, 2012). For example, F7M, a Hakka, is married to a Foochow husband, and they could not speak each other's dialect. She spoke Hokkien with his parents but chose to speak English with their son. The family language practices of the nine Foochow families were not anomalous. In Penang, Ong and Ben Said (forthcoming) reported that a mixed Hokkien and Teochew husband married a Cantonese wife and

chose to speak Mandarin because they did not understand one another's dialect. Subsequently, their daughter only managed to learn Mandarin. Chinese dialects cannot be used as a shared language in mixed marriages, and in households employing maids from another language background, which is why Mandarin (and sometimes English) becomes the prime choice as the family language.

## 4.2. Family Language Ideology Regarding Ethnicity

### 4.2.1. Foochow Ethnicity is Inherited

The findings showed a strong paternity dimension, whereby all three generations claimed that their ethnic identity was inherited from their Foochow father, which meant that they were born as a Foochow. Their paternity-based belief is so strong that they did not feel much need to speak the language to mark their membership in the Foochow community.

At the highest level of the family hierarchy, the four grandparents are of the view that even when Foochow people do not speak Foochow, they are still classified as Foochow because of descent:

*A Foochow has Foochow blood. He cannot run away. A lot of people tell me you don't speak Foochow to your children and grandchildren, you are not a Foochow. I tell them this does not matter; it is just a language. As long as they understand what I say, that is most important. (F5GM)*

In the parents' generation, F3F also felt strongly about Foochow ethnicity running in his blood. To F8M, paternity meant the father's blood line:

*In the Chinese culture and tradition, we always follow the father. If my father is Hainan, I'm a Hainan. This is same for Foochows. (F8M)*

With the grandparents and parents believing in the inheritance of Foochow ethnicity, it is not surprising that the children's generation also espoused such beliefs, for example, F9D2:

*I am still a Foochow. I guess because I am surrounded by Foochows. It doesn't matter if I speak the language or not. (F9D2)*

However, among the children's generation, there were growing beliefs that ethnicity is a "biological inheritance" from both parents (Fishman, 1977, p. 19). For instance, F7S had a Hakka father and a Foochow mother, and considered himself as

a half-half.

Due to such beliefs, the participants regarded their surname as an important marker of their ethnic identity. F9GF claimed that his surname, *Ting*, had a connection with his Foochow ethnicity. F3F also believed that surnames reflect the family's ancestors and ethnic group identity:

*It is important to know who your ancestors are. I think that it is good to know your ancestors and your bloodline. No matter where you live, you should know your surname and who your ancestors are. The surname is really important to know your family's name. (F3F)*

Among the Chinese, surnames show whether a person is a Foochow (e.g., Lau, Pang), Hokkien (e.g., Wee, Lim), Hakka (e.g., Bong, Ng) or Teochew (e.g., Sim) as well as their ancestor's province in China. Other researchers had written about how surnames mark ethnicity in Sarawak (Ting & Sussex, 2002) and Singapore (Tong & Chan, 2001).

#### 4.2.2. Speaking Foochow Triggers a Sense of Belonging

The grandparents and parents had emotional attachment to Foochow but not the children. Three out of the four grandparents claimed that speaking the Foochow dialect among Foochows gave a sense of privacy and that was the reason they continued to speak it after moving from Sibu to Kuching. F6GM explained:

*Foochows speak Foochow. ... If you know [how to speak] Foochow and the others don't know, you can talk in your own language and they will not know what you are talking about! Privacy! (F6GM)*

Foochow seems to be a secret language among Foochow speakers. For F5GM, it was clarity when communicating because Foochow was his first and heritage language.

Some of the parents interviewed also had emotional attachment to Foochow, which was accentuated when they were abroad. For example, F3F fondly referred to Foochow speakers as "my own people" and F4M bonded with strangers who spoke Foochow:

*Language is a way of expressing feelings. I am very happy in overseas when I hear someone speaking Foochow. I am so far from home, yet I meet my own*

people. No matter what, I will run over to him and speak a few words of Foochow. (F3F)

*I went to Singapore many years ago. The person I met was a Foochow and knew some Foochow language. When he found out that I was a Foochow, he was really happy and started speaking to me in bits and pieces of Foochow. It made me feel closer to the person. (F4M)*

F9F added that when one spoke Foochow to a Foochow speaker abroad, they could feel the closeness and togetherness. Ong (2018) also found that Penang Hokkien speakers felt sentimental when speaking Penang Hokkien with strangers abroad because they could instantly identify the hometown of the strangers due to their unique Hokkien vocabulary and accent.

At the lowest level of the family hierarchy, despite the children lacking proficiency in Foochow, all reiterated the view of feeling of being connected when hearing people speaking Foochow when they were out of their hometown, Kuching, as shown in interview extract from F2D:

*I will feel we are somehow connected. We are from the same kind, like one family. (F2D)*

The participants from three generations subscribed to the patrimony dimension of Fishman's (1977) language-ethnicity relationship but the belief is not as strong as the paternity dimension (described earlier).

#### 4.2.3. Phenomenological Meanings of Being Foochow

The meanings of being Foochow revolved around defining characteristics of Foochow people, Foochow food, and Foochow customs.

Several participants highlighted characteristics of Foochow people. The Foochows were seen as hardworking, smart, thrifty, trustworthy, family oriented, strong willed, united, and placed emphasis on children's education. F9GM said:

*Foochows are very hardworking because from young, I see my father works very hard. They are very thrifty because they have very little money. They came from far to earn money and when they came, they worked very, very hard. (F9GM)*

F1F gave a specific example to illustrate how hardworking Foochow business people were. He said that the trading hours of Foochow businesses were from 8

a.m. to 9 p.m. whereas businesses operated by other Chinese dialect groups closed at 6 p.m. When the Foochows moved from Sibü to Kuching, they had to compete with other dialect communities for survival and they worked hard to earn three meals a day. F1F added that since most Foochows had adopted Christianity which teaches equal treatment of everyone (“*because God loved everyone equally*”), the Foochow parents wanted to give their daughters the same opportunities to a good education as their sons. Their earnings were saved for their children’s education overseas and as they were working so hard, they also did not have the time to spend their hard-earned money on leisure activities such as travelling. The second researcher’s grandfather considered it a waste of money to travel because all that one brought back were their two eyes.

The trust among Foochow people was borne out of the need for unity in adverse circumstances. F9F said that during the 1970s, there were not many Foochow people living in Kuching and they frequently helped one another. F4F clarified the trustworthiness matter:

*They trust one each a lot. The moment you mention your grandfather, the other Foochow will know. You just have to mention who your father or grandfather is, and we will know because we stay very united as Foochows. There is trust in business. For example, when I have a partnership and go to Indonesia, you can pass to me RM20,000 to RM50,000. We trust each other with so much money and the other Foochow is also very trustworthy. After he earns money, he will distribute the money that he earned fairly among the partners. (F4F)*

As Foochow people usually had a large network of family and friends, they were understanding, had great teamwork, and assisted one another with their connections (F9D3). Foochow clan associations also helped to bring the Foochow people together and they built good friendships.

Another defining characteristic of the Foochow is respect for elders, brought up by F4M who said:

*The Foochows are very concerned about titles for the elders. They respect the elders a lot. In Foochow, we have different titles for each hierarchy of elders. (F4M)*

The Foochow women also stood out as being different from those of other ethnic groups. According to F9D3, Foochow women were capable, aggressive in handling financial matters, and getting work done while the men cared a lot about their



families. To F9D3, Foochow women and men had a huge sense of pride and prestige. These values can explain why the Foochow people are driven to be hardworking and not to betray trust in one another.

Next, there are characteristic Foochow food such as *kampua mee* (fresh egg noodles served with slices of barbeque pork and pork dumplings), *mee sua* (wheat vermicelli), *pek tin yok* (soup brewed in eight types of herbs and spices with pork leg), *hoogan chau chai* (rice noodles served in preserved vegetables soup), and *gong pian* (salty doughnut which may be filled with lean pork stir fried with spring onions). As F3M described,

*We eat Foochow food like kampua mee and gong pian. This tradition is still carried on and the children like it. (F3M)*

The “tradition” of having Foochow food continued in F9F’s family among her children (F9G2 and F9G3) although they could not speak Foochow. Such practice is also observed in Ong’s (2018) study where a Hokkien speaker served her family members with traditional Chinese hotpot that contained seafood such as sea cucumber, scallops, and Chinese oysters during the Lunar New Year festival. The Hokkien speaker mentioned that she continued the tradition so that her grandchildren could experience the authentic Chinese culture, which was practised by Chinese-Malaysians after assimilating into Malaysia’s multiracial culture.

Finally, some participants defined themselves as Foochows because they practised Foochow customs. An example is marriage customs. F4F said that when the Foochows married off their daughters, they received huge *ang pows* (red envelopes containing money to symbolise good luck) as compared to other dialect communities so they did not “lose” anything. F4F’s mother (F4GM) and daughter (F9GD1) both described a different practice for the bridal couple, which is bowing to elders instead of serving them tea, which was traditionally practised by other Chinese dialect communities. F9GD1 stated that such customary practices differentiated them as Foochows. Nevertheless, her dad, F9F, felt sad that some very old Foochow customs like using *ngeu pang* (potty for collecting urine) were gone.

Interestingly, F7M said that Foochow parents were stricter about bringing up their children with proper table manners than other Chinese dialect groups:

*We have table manners. We are not supposed to cry when we are at the table, we are not supposed to talk too much when having food. We are not supposed to put*

*our hands on the forehead when we eat.* (F7M)

Some participants, such as F4F and F2D, commented that when it came to food, the Foochows were usually generous with their portions and orders and they enjoyed feasting with family and friends.

In a nutshell, the characteristics of being a Foochow, eating Foochow food, and practising Foochow customs pointed to the phenomenology dimension of Fishman's (1977) language-ethnicity relationship, which was held by a small portion of the Foochow participants interviewed in the study.

#### **4.3. Family Language Management**

The results in the previous two sections clearly showed that not every participant spoke Foochow as their heritage language despite defining themselves as Foochow through various language ideologies. In this section, the participants' opinions regarding the survival of Foochow are presented followed by their management strategies to ensure the future generation continues to speak Foochow.

Two grandparents expressed their disappointment regarding Foochow's survival. F6GM said:

*Worry, a bit worry. In my family, my children are not using Foochow much but I hope they understand the language. In here, we have to see whether Foochow is passed down or not, if it is passed down to the younger generation, then it will survive. If not, we will lose the dialect.* (F6GM)

F5GF agreed with F6GM's statement that many Chinese dialects would gradually disappear in Malaysia. However, F6GM said that the Foochow population in his ancestor's hometown in China was huge, and his roots were there. Whether the Foochow children would feel connected to their ancestral roots in China in the future is questionable. Ong (2020) asserted that the continuous use of Chinese dialects in Malaysia will prevent the families' umbilical cord from breaking.

At the parents' level, there were different opinions expressed by the fathers and mothers. Three mothers denied that Foochow would disappear in their families; instead, they stated that they either have taught their children to speak the dialect or would be teaching their grandchildren to speak it when their children marry and have babies. F3M said:

*It should be fine with me. I think it is better for them to know and learn the language. My children know how to listen. I also want my grandchild to learn. My son and husband have begun speaking talking to my grandchild in Foochow.* (F3M)

Such assurance, as uttered by F3M, supported Gal's (1978) comment that female language users like mothers were usually more sensitive towards language change and thus, they might have acted quickly to teach their children Foochow so that the dialect would continue to survive. For the rest of the fathers and mothers, the eventual disappearance of the Foochow dialect in Kuching was regretful but inevitable, as represented in F1F's voice:

*I feel regret and sad. People are using Foochow lesser and lesser nowadays, the dialect may disappear from generation to generation. In Sibü, there are still a lot of people speaking Foochow. The Foochow association here should encourage the use of Foochow but they stress on using Mandarin. This makes all the dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, and Foochow become less important. In Malaysia, we share a common language and that is Mandarin. When we emphasise on using Mandarin, we unintentionally neglect and abandon our dialects.* (F1F)

However, F1F attributed responsibility to the Foochow association to give more priority to Foochow than Mandarin but not to himself to speak Foochow to his grandchildren. Other participants like F2F and F9F also accepted, as a matter of fact, that Mandarin and English have become popular languages that acted as family language and first language(s) for children.

At the children's level, all stated that Foochow would definitely not survive for long in Kuching and within their families. Such prediction was expected because most of them could not speak and understand Foochow. Some might understand simple conversations in Foochow. F3S mentioned that in Bintulu and Sibü, Foochow was widely spoken because many trading activities were conducted using the dialect. He found that with such continuous usage, it was beneficial because the dialect would continue to survive for several more generations as even youngsters were forced to speak it. However, in Kuching, Foochow is being replaced by Mandarin and/or English in the Foochow community. F9D1 shed further light on the matter—at the rate of how the younger generation spoke the language(s) of their choice (at the time of the interview), Foochow would disappear in the community

as it had disappeared within her family because her younger brother could no longer understand and speak the dialect. Most families had prioritised educational languages because English and Mandarin had economic benefits and were taught at school and used at work.

Due to such negative predictions for the survival of Foochow in Kuching, the participants subsequently had suggestions on how to maintain the dialect. Their family language management strategies had others as the agent of change but not themselves.

Firstly, F1D suggested for children to participate in church or clan association activities where they could have the opportunity to learn and speak Foochow. She stated that in the church she attended, everyone spoke Foochow and thus, her children had no choice but to communicate in Foochow. Although her children could not learn everything, similar to her “tongue-tied Foochow”, they were still learning the dialect, which was better than many other children whose parents did not make any effort for their children’s heritage language acquisition. Undoubtedly, if F1D were to carry out her suggestion, she would be responsible to bring her children to church or clan activities but this is as far as she would go because she did not talk about herself using Foochow as the family language.

Secondly, F3F mentioned about the importance of promoting Foochow through music so that children could learn to sing in Foochow. F3F’s suggestion involved the music industry, which absolved him of personal responsibility to propagate the use of Foochow in the family.

Lastly, a number of participants recommended a Foochow speaking home environment for the young children to learn the dialect (e.g., F2F). However, both F2F and F3M did not talk about themselves as the agent of change to create the Foochow speaking home environment. F5S attributed agency to his parents. He expressed his wish to allow his children to learn Foochow through his parents when he marries in the future.

Taking a critical view of the language management strategies proposed by the children, we would predict the loss of Foochow from families in urban localities because it is too far reaching to expect the music industry and social or religious organisations, or even grandparents, to carry the responsibility of ensuring that their future children can speak Foochow.

#### 4.4. Dimensions of Language-Ethnicity Relationship and the Connection with Family Language Policy

Table 2 shows the Foochow participants' strong subscription to the paternity dimension of the language-ethnicity relationship (27 of 29 participants or 93.1%), followed by the patrimony dimension (22 or 75.9%). A few (13 participants or 44.8%) expressed phenomenological beliefs in the distinguishing characteristics of Foochow people, consumption of Foochow cuisine, and practice of Foochow customs. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between language-ethnicity dimension and generation. The relation between these variables was not significant,  $X^2(4, N = 29) = 1.3, p = .90$ . There were no statistically significant generational differences in language-ethnicity dimension.

**Table 2**

*Analysis of Participants' Subscription to the Three Dimensions of Language-Ethnicity Relationship (N=29)*

Generation	Paternity		Patrimony		Phenomenology	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Grandparent (n=4)	4	100	3	75	1	25
Parent (n=14)	12	85.7	12	85.7	8	57.1
Children (n=11)	11	100	7	63.6	4	36.4
Total (N=29)	27	93.1	22	75.9	13	44.8

\*Note: For the codes given to participants, F1 to F9 refers to Family 1 to 9. The next two places signify the generation. GF and GM denote grandfather and grandmother respectively. F and M denote father and mother respectively while S denote sons and D1 to D3 denote daughters.

The participants' subscription to the three dimensions of language-ethnicity relationship was analysed based on their responses to the question of what makes them a Foochow. Therefore, it is important to dwell on the absence of views on particular dimensions, as a matter of transparency in the data analysis. In the paternity dimension, only two participants (F4F and F4M) did not define their ethnic identity, probably because they did not have views to add to their mother's (F4GM). In the patrimony dimension, seven participants did not talk about their emotional attachment to Foochow, probably because they could not speak Foochow and most were from the children's generation. In the phenomenology dimension, half of the participants did not talk about Foochow food or Foochow customs. They said that they had blended into the modern culture and lifestyle.

**Figure 1**  
 Conceptualisation of Language-Ethnicity Relationship and Family Language Policy

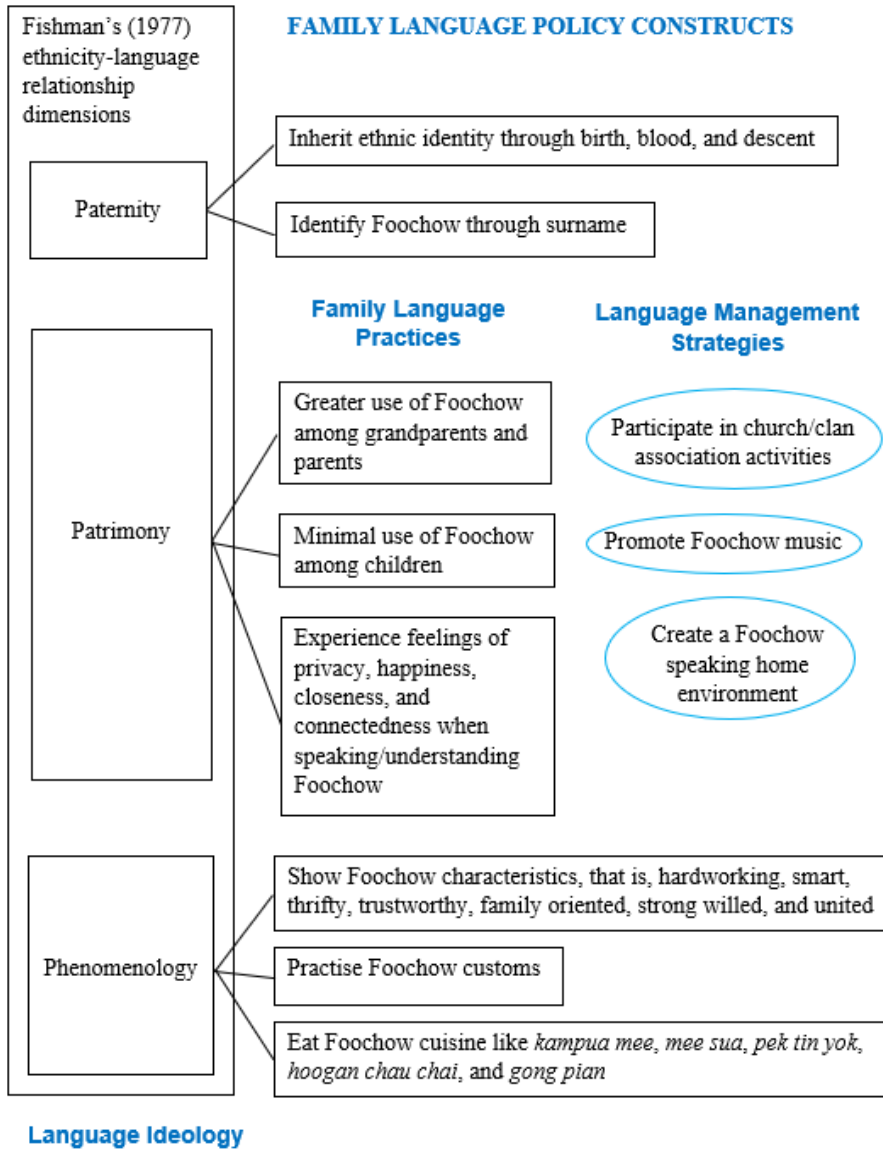


Figure 1 is a framework on the connection between the three dimensions of language-ethnicity relationship and family language policy. The patrimony dimension of Fishman's (1977) language-ethnicity relationship intersects with the language ideology aspect of the family language policy. Their language ideology is stronger on paternity rather than patrimony, which sets the scene for a decline in the

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use of Foochow from the grandparents to the children, and a concomitant increase in the use of Mandarin and/or English. Nevertheless, the children's generation are keener on language management strategies for their future offspring to speak Foochow than the older generations. The main problem is that the children attributed responsibility to others such as their parents to speak Foochow to their offspring, getting their children to participate in Foochow-speaking activities, and the music industry to promote Foochow songs.

## 5. Discussion

The study produced three noteworthy findings. Firstly, the findings demonstrate a strong subscription to the paternity dimension of language-ethnicity relationship (Fishman, 1977), that is, the nine families believed that they were Foochow by blood, birth, and descent. They do not necessarily need to speak their heritage language in order to claim their ethnic identity. The beliefs that the patrimony dimension is less crucial leads to the lack of intergenerational transmission of Foochow in urban localities. The findings lend support to Baumann's (2004) claim that ethnic identity is based on family and kinship ties. As is expected, there were fewer Foochow who opted for subjective definitions of ethnicity but the study revealed that the phenomenological meaning of being Foochow would be based on the characteristics of Foochow people, cuisine and customs. These Foochow families' subscription to the paternity dimension aligns with the characteristics of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore (Clammer, 1982; Tong & Chan, 2001), the USA (Kang, 2004), Canada (Mah, 2005), and Malaysia (Puah & Ting, 2017), who believe that Chinese ethnicity is a biological inheritance. It is this very belief (language ideology) that may cause the Foochows of the future to lose their distinctiveness as Foochow because the young generation of the present already have doubtful proficiency in the Foochow dialect.

Secondly, the findings suggest that family language policy cannot be seen as unitary. The grandparents and parents in the study applied different family language policies to themselves and to their children. On family language practices, the grandparents and parents continued to speak their heritage language to members of the Foochow community. The grandparents and parents do not "force" the children to speak Foochow. Instead, they began to code-mix with standard languages (particularly Mandarin and English) because the grandchildren could not understand

much Foochow. In today's era, many grandparents would speak the language of the grandchildren, which was usually the medium of instruction at school (Carstens, 2018; Ong & Troyer, Forthcoming). They felt that the school language has greater economic and academic values for their future career. On language ideology, the grandparents and parents' ethnic identity is tied up with Foochow. Therefore, speaking the language triggers a warm sense of belonging but the children do not feel any emotional attachment to Foochow. As for language management strategies, the grandparents and parents have accepted the reality that there would not be intergenerational transmission of Foochow but it is the children's generation who want their offspring to be exposed to their heritage language. Many middle and old generation Chinese in Malaysia are demonstrating reactive agency (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2015) as their language choice is being influenced by the younger generation who seem to have more control. What this study has shown is that family language practices and language ideology are consistent, but not with language management.

Thirdly, it is predicted that the Foochow dialect may gradually lose its role as a family language in Foochow families due to the grandparents' and parents' inclination to define their ethnic identity by descent, resulting in them not "forcing" the children to speak Foochow. The children were communicating mainly in Mandarin or English, or some even adopted Hokkien as their *de facto* heritage. The young generation of the future may drop other cultural behaviour that mark them as Foochow such as the cuisine and traditional customs because of the move towards Malaysian style cuisine and Westernised culture. What remains is the symbolic surname which marks them as Foochow, but stripped of the cultural behaviours which make the Foochow people stand out from other Chinese dialect groups. This investigation using both family language policy and language-ethnicity dimensions has found qualitative evidence to explain why a pan-Chinese identity, void of dialectal distinctions, is likely to emerge based on the perspective of the ethnic group members themselves.

## 6. Conclusion

This study showed how diminished use of Foochow can be attributed to the strong subscription to the paternity dimension and weak subscription to the patrimony dimension. By exploring a connection between Fishman's (1977) dimension of language-ethnicity relationship and King et al.'s (2008) family language policy, the



study has shown how language ideology can explain language practices. Future studies should investigate political and economic factors that may influence the language ideology of the different generations of the Chinese diaspora to ratify the overall Chinese community's claim of their ethnic identity and influence of their language ideology on the disappearance of heritage languages.

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