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BEING AND BECOMING
AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INFLUENCE OF PLACE AND CULTURE ON THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY THROUGH PRINT-MEDIA

HELEN GUEK YEE MEI

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ABSTRACT

This aim of the research is to investigate the intersection of cultural identity in defining the being and becoming of Malaysian Chinese. The boundaries of differences and ethnic classifications were blurred through accumulated and intersected layers in the context of everyday here-and-now living experiences. The research traced the history of the migration and settlement of the Chinese in Malaysia as background, the overlapping and intersection of the culture identity was examined through the theory of identity with two different tendencies: one that is stable, unified and homogeneous, and the other being fluid and evolving. The discussion follows the Yuval-Davis' theory of two Models of Belonging. The key artists in this research are: Taraneh Hemami, Redza Piyadasa, Wong Hoy Cheong, Chong Siew Ying and Yee I-Lann, who centered their production around issues of identity-formation and the nature of the diasporic life. The reference artworks presented here suggest the fluid nature of ethnic identity, accompanied by multiple factors including location, level of interaction, time period as well as generation. In defining the being and belonging of the Malaysian Chinese, personal and collective experiences are provided to illustrate the search for the belonging of home. By visually manifesting these submerged and accumulated layers of intersection, they seek to represent the evolving inner realities of the Malaysian Chinese, which have been altered and overlapped by the everyday living experience as fusion constructed individuals.

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PENGARUH TEMPAT DAN BUDAYA DALAM PEMBENTUKAN IDENTITI KEKITAAN DAN KEWUJUDAN MELALUI MEDIA CETAK

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji persilangan identiti budaya dan mentakrifkan maksud kekitaan dan kewujudan kaum Cina Malaysia. Kajian ini meniliti sempadan perbezaan dan klasifikasi etnik menerusi pertindihan dan persilangan budaya dalam konteks pengalaman dalam kehidupan seharian. Perkembangan sejarah penempatan kaun Cina dijadikan asas sebagai latar belakang kajian, dimana aspek pertindihan dan persilangan identiti budaya dikaji melalui teori identiti dengan dua kecenderungan yang berbeza: yang pertama bersifat stabil, bersatu dan seragam, dan yang kedua bersifat mengalir dan sentiasa berubah. Perbincangan dilakukan berpandukan teori Yuval-Davis berkenaan dua Model Kekitaan. Pelukis rujukan utama dalam penyelidikan ini adalah Taraneh Hemami, Redza Piyadasa, Wong Hoy Cheong, Chong Siew Ying dan Yee I- Lann, dengan hala tuju yang sama melalui kehidupan diaspora mereka. Kayra-kayra rujukan yang dipilih memaparkan isu-isu yang berfokus kepada pembentukan identiti etnik dengan mengambil pelbagai faktor seperti lokasi, tahap interaksi, tempoh masa dan juga generasi. Dalam mentakrifkan maksud kekitaan dan kewujudan kaum Cina Malaysia, pengalaman peribadi dan kolektif diaplikasikan untuk menggambarkan pencarian terhadap maksud kekitaan setempat ditanahair. Aspek persilangan budaya yang terkumpul terbentuk disebarkan secara visual dan dimanifestasikan sebagai representasi realiti dalaman kaum Cina Malaysia yang sentiasa berubah, diperbaharui dan dipengaruhi oleh pengalaman kehidupan seharian sebagai pembentukan identiti individu.

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CHAPTER 1-

CENTRAL ARGUMENT

1.1 Introduction

This research was started with the aim of investigating the belonging of place and culture identity through the experience of Malaysian Chinese. This study was mainly focused on my personal experience, family memories of being part of the Malaysian Chinese community within the pluralistic society of Malaysia. The research also seek to present an overview of the notion of person as a “Pre-constructed” (Castells, 1997) individual, which was characterized by its multi-cultural, multi-religion, and multi-lingual milieu, which also comprise experiences from migration experience

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within Malaysia context, the experience of multi-racial impact on my personal identity formation.

The current ethnic classifications of 'Malay', 'Chinese', 'Indian' and 'Others' mark the diversity of ethnicity within the country. Malaysia also continues to proclaim and celebrate ethnic and religious diversity as a multicultural or plural society. However, the division of categories based on biological and cultural differences has often become a crucial identity marker, in this context, the Malaysian Chinese's living experience; both in official discourse and in the daily experiences of a particular individual.

Although "every ethnic identity has a history and often the label is derived from a people's place of origin" (Tan, 2004, p. 92), if we spend a second thought on the ethnic boundaries and even the meaning of ethnicity, most cases are more complex and ambiguous in the context of migration experience. Anthropologists have also debated the migration relevance on culture and ethnic identification. Through migration history, the Chinese's heterogeneous tendencies have been flattened and sorted into standard classifications under the racial census, which is determined by the logic of racial and culture differences. But just as Ang observes, "The very name with which 'ethnic' is referred to ... Chinese (or Indian) - already transposes her or him to another site of symbolic belonging, a site which is not 'here.'" (Ang, 2001, p. 17), she

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also commented that her own experience of being Chinese, is "inscribed as it was on the very surface of my body" (Ang, 2001, p. 28).

Thus, this research is an attempt to capture and present the inner realities of the Malaysian Chinese through personal and collective experience, with the submerged and accumulated traces beneath the surface of the skin and features. By visually exploring and manifesting the idea; person as "Pre-constructed" individual (Castells, 1997), was characterized by its cross-cultural experiences and the history of culture overlapping within the plural society. With the examination of the personal and collective experience of being Malaysian Chinese as my focus of study, I intent to present the multi-layered constructed individual through historical trajectory as 'immigrant races'. In the journey and settlement as well as integration as Malaysian Chinese; the cultural affiliation in ethnic identity has been altered and overlapped by layers of migration experience, and will continue to evolve by the 'every day-defined' social reality (Shamsul, 1996, p. 10).

In the process of developing this research, there are two significant approaches in the theory of identity formation. The "essentialist" perceives the individual's uniqueness as biological by tracing one's ancestry, and identifying with members of similar physical characteristics. Identity is seen as a notion of being unified by fixed and unchanging tendencies. As highlighted by Wang (2004), the

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Chinese people have the tendency to maintain their cultural identity; in this trend of thoughts, they tend to trace their roots through asserting binding kinship.

The social constructionists contended the idea of identity as given and innateness, but suggest it is a product that arose from the acts of an individual's will (Craig, 1995). To social constructionists, identities are fluid in nature and can be reconstructed in new social and cultural conditions. Culture has also been defined as "the full range of learned human behavior patterns" (Pate, 2012, p. 85); the term was first used in this way by the pioneer English anthropologist Tylor (1871), who suggested that it is not only a past tense but also a present continuous tense. Some even described culture as an adaptive mechanism for humans, which will continue to evolve and find its relevance and meaning in new contexts and new situations.

In the cross-cultural experience of migration, the physical relocation involves a new definition of who we are in the environment space. By the insertion of new learned experience, the intersections of the various dimensions of identity occurred. Although the nexus of the dimensions will reflect different priorities for each layer, they are still woven together and integral through a meeting point. This development of self- identification is an internal process that allows the individual to establish her or his sense of placement and belonging in the larger society. In this context, identity is a dynamic and evolving process, always in progress and incomplete, not only a

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matter of 'being' as well as 'becoming' (Yuval-Davis, 2012, p. 7); it belongs to the past as much as to the future (Hall, 1990). Immigrant identity in particular has displayed a kind of heterogeneous, ‘multiples rootedness’: manifold, multiple, and never singular (Chan, 2005, p. xiv).

The investigation will start with the following section which provides a context of the Malaysian Chinese experience as a background to explore the features and characteristics of the Malaysian Chinese, within the topics of culture identity through migration history, cross-cultural experience and evolving identity through localization.

1.1.1 Tracing the Submerged Past

The history of immigration is as old as Malaya’s history, the waves of immigration gave rise to a common culture and tradition along the maritime region. The inclusive diversity has long developed before the concept of globalization, even before our nation came into being. Malaysia in its history of early Malaya, as well as most of the countries in this region, had once celebrated the most diverse, inclusive and universal social reality. It was also

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a place where major religions of the world met, people of different nationalities came and many eventually settled down in the various states of old Malaya especially Malacca. According to some historians' research, there were more than 80 languages used in the region during the glory days of the Malaccan dynasties (Tay, 2009).

As Farish observed, the old Malaya has been "perpetually exposed to external cultural influences and variable social factors that emanated from its two closest (and oldest) civilized neighbors, India and China" (Farish, 2011, p. 25). By adding colors to the rich cultural landscapes, Malaya has been characterized by its experiences from human migration both of the past and present generations, with its cross-cultural experiences and the history of culture overlapping.

The earliest Chinese settlement in Malaya can be traced back to the times of the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century. Wang (2011, p.4), in his examination of Malaysian Chinese noted the Chinese communities had developed with successive "layers" of migration through the centuries. Records of the first generation of overseas Chinese who are mostly Chinese merchants (Hua-Shang), can be traced back and documented as early as 1349, more than 600 years ago. The second wave of migrants (Hua-Gong) were

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laborers who were mostly poor and often illiterate, sailed to the unknown Southeast Asia with the strong motivation to endure hardship, hoping to seek wealth and return to China to "Guang Zong Yao Zu", meaning to be successful and bring honor to one's ancestors (Wang, 2003).

In the practice of ancestor worship in the cultural tradition of China, values like respect, filial piety and veneration of lineage and family ties were some of the most important philosophies and teachings, even to the extent of becoming a common 'religion'. All these values have been firmly planted in the minds of the Chinese, regardless of the religion one adheres to, as within the Chinese cultural realm; the ancestors, self, and heirs are connected in a web of relationships bounded by harmony, hierarchy and mutual dependence (Lakos, 2010, p. 2). As heavy emphasis was laid on family obligations, this added to the strong hold on the sentimental attachments of coming back to the motherland, and for those who left home they were expected to keep in touch with the village from which they came and finally to return, to die and be buried where the ancestors are buried.

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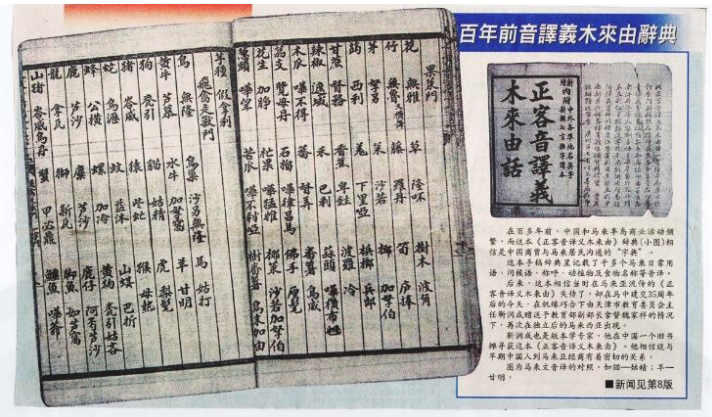

Figure 1.1. Hundred year old Malay-Chinese dictionary, (2009)

By the early the eighteenth century, the Chinese had well established themselves in Malacca. A Chinese–Malay dictionary as early as 1403 and some transliteration version of the local language suggested the effort taken to understand and to communicate with local language among the early Chinese community. They intermarry with locals and develop a localize hybrid sub-cultural, a unique fusion culture which refers itself as the Baba and Nyonya, or Peranakan Chinese. They embraced the Chinese and Malay influence by adopting the indigenous life-style, language and manners, even acquiring Malay as their mother tongue, replacing the original Hokkien language (Tan, 2004). However, in customs of religious practices remained the features of their ethnic identity as Chinese.

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Figure 1.2. Example of batik with peranakan motif, (2009).

There are other culture influences such as European and Indo-Chinese in this localized fusion of identity with a heterogeneous set of practices, beliefs, and arts. Take clothing for example, the Nyonya's Baju Panjang (Long Dress) was adapted from the native Malay's Baju Kurung (a traditional Malay costume), but with European, Malay and Chinese influences too. And the Batik sarong that the Nyonyas wear incorporates elements of Chinese aesthetics with Chinese influence, and a richer palette of many colors (Roojen, 2001). In the vast Chinese cemetery in Malacca, Bukit Cina, rest the earliest Peranakan tombs, they did not return to their ancestral land and were buried where they lived and toiled.

As more and more Chinese women emigrated, these early Chinese started to form homes and families within the community. For these early

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migrants, although their sentiments tie with memories of their earlier home, their parents and close-knit family members are thousands of miles away. It was often difficult to maintain communication and they gradually lose touch due to the physical distant, wars, and even memories were slowly submerged over time and space. Some decided to settle down in the land where a new life has more to offer, in which they began more and more to see their interests linked to the land with the continuity of the family lineage; in this local setting where the home is built, and where the investment in their future is made.

In the process of social development, where these heterogeneous people were divided according to surname and dialect, associations were also been slowly set up based on social needs like commerce and occupational groups which is interlinked among the community. Hickling (1991, p. 49), a former Law Revision Commissioner of Malaysia also observed these early families of Chinese lived, worked and died in a single-minded pursuit of the necessities of life:

> "Although they are thousands of miles from their homeland, cleared the jungle, planted vegetables and fruits and pepper gardens and so on, built their schools, educated their children, lived, worked and died in an environment alien to them: yet who, by their industry, built the modern state of Malaysia."

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Indeed, as mentioned by Voon (2007, p. 79) in his analysis of these early migrants, settling down for them was not as an alien but was part of the traditional concepts that guided the life of the Chinese. People used to be attached to the land, and set up their family wherever it might be (Ān jiā luò hù). Apart from this age-old Chinese philosophy, a few others also describe a similar concept, which describe life as a seed falling down from the mother plant, when it touches the ground it sprouts and takes root to grow a new life (Luò dì shēng gēn), and to live a peaceful life in contentment (Ān jū lè yè), abiding by law and behaving oneself (Ān fèn shǒu jǐ).

Beside the development of the economy, after obtaining stability in economy, the Chinese entrepreneur devoted his energies to Chinese community projects such as building infrastructures like roads, bridges, schools, hospitals and the giving of donations to dialect association and mutual aid funds as the drive for social improvement. Since one of the priorities of early Chinese immigrants was education, according to research, the first Chinese school was set up just two decades after the Chinese laborer began to work in the tin mines in Ampang in the late 1850s (Yow, 2008).

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Many of the buildings built by these early immigrants are still around, bearing witness to the early Chinese search of a new home/ homeland and they built them here in Malaysia. These more than a century old houses and historical buildings were built in different parts of Malaysia. Such investments in physical structure, time and persistence, have justified itself, even right from the beginning, it was not only a temporary settlement in their mind, they had built them as their permanent home in their heart, which they can pass on to many generations to come.

The attachment to China based on family ties had sluggishly declined with the passing of the first generation of settlers, which some had still held on to the living memory of their early home and family. However, apart from the occasional dreams of retirement and burial, the last vestiges of personal ties to mainland China had inevitably disappeared. Increasingly, the communities have come to be composed of local-born Chinese rather than emigrants. From the twentieth century, Chinese links to their ancestral homeland were mainly sentimental. Currently, the Chinese communities, which constitute about 26.0%, form the second largest group in the composite population of Malaysia. Mostly composed of the third or fourth generation descendants of the early immigrants, local-born Chinese had

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almost totally outnumbered the China-born Chinese. Today, only a minority have fragmented and diluted memories of their ancestral homeland.

1.1.2 Layered Constructed Individual

Tracing the position of the Chinese in Malaysia today is an accumulated sum through migration history; the process of physically relocating, settling down and participating in nation-building in the country, the adjustment, adaptation and self-negotiation, with the new learned experience involving a new definition of who they are, which have indeed redefined their identity over time.

Chai (2012), together with Wang (1998), Tan (Tan 2004) and Leo (2007), shared a similar view, in their attempt to analyze, in particular, the Malaysian Chinese (might not be applicable to the Peranakan and other native-born Chinese, the first wave of Chinese migrant), in different stages with the change of identity from 'Hua-Qiao' in the past to 'Hua-Ren' today which reflects the process of localization as experienced by the Chinese. This means to say that they have adapted a multiple of identities through historical,

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cultural, national, communal, ethnic, and class-based influence. They have classified the stages into three generations:

1. The first generation as “Overseas Chinese” (Hua-Qiao, Pre-1950s), connotes sentimental ties with China, with the mentality leaning towards mainland China with historical continuity, which Chai described as “The leaves that fall and return to the roots of the tree” (Chai, 2012, p. 78).
2. The second generation as “Chinese descendents” (Hua-Yi, Post-1970s) refers to birth and bloodlines, culturally and linguistically adhering to certain Chinese characteristics and ethno-national consciousness towards the country politically, which Chai described as “The leaves that fall and take root elsewhere" (Chai, 2012, p. 78).
3. The third generation “Chinese people” (Hua-Ren, from 1990s to the present): refers to cultural identify under the nation-building project of Malaysia, in terms of politics, economics, culture and education, but the emphasis is also on keeping pace with global ethics, democratic dialogue and social transformation. Chai described this stage as “With eyes open to the world” (Chai, 2012, p. 78).

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