

**PERSONALIZED PERSPECTIVES OF CHINESE ETHNICITY IN MODERN  
MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

by

Kristy Duhamel

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project asks the relevant question of “Who are you and where are you going?”—a dilemma of daily concern for most University students around the world. Specifically, this research seeks to describe how one community of university students—the Chinese Malaysian student population at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, experiences its Chinese ethnicity in this multi-ethnic nation-state. Who and what is considered “Chinese” in Malaysia? How is the Chinese ethnicity defined and presented, or contested, and transformed within Chinese young people living in a rapidly globalizing, and majority Islamic country? Based on a one-month qualitative fieldwork study of Chinese Malaysian students from the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in Petaling Jaya, a bustling suburb of Malaysia’s capital city Kuala Lumpur, this research highlights how broad sociological categories such as class, gender, religion, and urban or rural residency create a multiplicity of ethnic realities for young Malaysian Chinese. The results of this study are presented through a complex analysis of the effects of such ‘objective strata’ on the subjective ethnic experiences of two very different Chinese Malaysian college students whom I came to know during my fieldwork. Though these two subjects occupy one position as ‘ethnically Chinese’ in the official political discourse within their nation, their personal stories display the true diversity of subjective experiences of Chinese ‘ness’ that exist within modern Malaysia.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity is a concept that has dominated the Malaysian political and social landscape for the greater part of the twentieth century. The divide between the nation's three main ethnic groups, the Malays, Indians, and Chinese, is not only cultural but has become politicized, weaving itself into the very fabric of everyday life in Malaysia. The effect of such institutional ethnic segregation in Malaysia has been the creation of a citizenry that is perhaps more self-consciously aware of ethnic identity than any other population in the world. It seems that the question of "Who are you?" and the answer that follows, as either "Malay," "Chinese," "Indian," or "Other," will shade any subsequent interaction. Yet, even in this nation in which divisions between ethnic groups have created monolithic, politicized ethnic identities, I argue that it is not only *between* groups, but also *within* each ethnic category, that ethnic identities differ. Such differentiation occurs as each person's ethnicity interacts with other "fields of identity"<sup>1</sup> such as gender, religion, geographic location, and class to create varied subjective understandings of ethnic identity. Thus, this research seeks to

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<sup>1</sup> Eric C. Thompson coins the term "Fields of Identity" in his work "Malay Male Migrants: Negotiating Contested Identities in Malaysia," and defines it as "the structures of feeling surrounding ethnicity, gender, class, and place" within which his subjects "operate." (2003:419)

display how one group of ‘essentialized’ Chinese Malaysian students at the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, experience different ethnic subjectivities as a result of their different gendered, classed, geographical, and religious positions. In doing so, this thesis asks the essential question of “Who are you?” not only in exploring the more broad ways in which Chinese ethnic identity in Malaysia is expressed and defined, but also in seeking out the more specific ethnic understandings that may differ within this broad ethnic category. I take as my particular focus the contrasting experiences of two Chinese Malaysian students, Shu Fang and John, who inhabit a single objective definition as “Chinese Malaysian,” but subjectively experience their ethnic identities in varied ways, governed by the fields of identity addressed above. In creating this contemporary account of the differing experiences of two Chinese young people, this research provides a necessary ‘update’ on the changing significance of what it means to be Chinese in a group of young Chinese Malaysians who may never actually set foot on the Chinese mainland, and yet whose entire lives have been governed by their shared political and ethnic identity.

The following chapter shall highlight the importance and complexity of studying the Chinese ethnicity in the Malaysian context. I begin with a description of the political and social shifts that have occurred in Malaysia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and elaborate on the effect of such changes on the lives of Chinese Malaysians, creating both unity among this ethnic group, and dissension within it. In doing so, I hope to give theoretical background to the gendered, classed, religious, and geographic differences that I found within my own Chinese Malaysian subjects. At the end of Chapter Two, I address the more broad literature on ethnicity and ethnic identity formation in the global context and explain how such literature fits into the Malaysian



framework. Chapter Three presents the methodology of my research, and discusses the unique opportunities and potential consequences of working students at the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. It also highlights the differences in ‘field experiences’ between my two subjects Shu Fang, and John (these names are pseudonyms). Finally, Chapter Four and Five present an analysis of the different Chinese identities of Shu Fang and John, and describe the potential relevance these findings could have for other ethnic studies.

## **Chapter 2**

### **BACKGROUND**

#### Introduction

In the years since its independence as a nation, Malaysia has undergone drastic changes, including rapid economic growth and industrialization during the 1980's and 1990's, and changes in political policies that increasingly focus on the enforcement of Islamic Sharia law on all citizens of Malaysia (Shamsul, 1997). Such economic and ideological changes have drastically affected the ethnic relations in the nation, and have had much influence on ethnic identity construction in Malaysia. This chapter relays the historical and political shifts that have occurred in Malaysia during the past half-century, and explores the ethnic identity changes that have gone along with them. The chapter ends with a more broad review of the research that has been done on ethnicity in a global context, relating it to the Malaysian situation.

#### A Political History of Malaysia

The question of ethnic identity in overseas Chinese communities takes on a new significance in the Malaysian context, as it is a nation in which politics, religion, and ethnicity are overtly and inexorably intertwined. Indeed, Malaysia has been somewhat of a paradox since colonial times, known internationally both as a place of 'multicultural stability,' and as a country with profoundly politicized racial segregation. There has been ethnic division between the nation's three main 'races'—

the Chinese, Indians, and Malays (Muslims)—since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when British colonizers employed a ‘divide and conquer’ technique to rule over the Malayan peninsula. This policy divided local populations into different social roles by race, thus ethnically compartmentalizing the Malaysian landscape (Fee, 2006). Moreover, because the Chinese ethnic group in Malaysia makes up almost 30% of the nation's populace and gained much economic clout during the British colonial times, the indigenous Malays came to fear that their country would be taken over by the powerful Chinese—a belief which has driven most of the ethnic tensions throughout Malaysian history (Tan, 1982). Such seeds of ethnic divide remained after Malaysia gained its independence in 1957, and indeed, gained in significance, when the new national government created a Malay-favoring constitution that made the citizenry of Chinese Malaysians “conditional” on their acceptance of the Malay populations as the indigenous peoples of Malaysia, and their compliance with Article 153 in the Constitution. This article explicitly granted the Malay “Bumiputeras,” or “Sons of the soil,” reservations of land, quotas in the civil service, public scholarships and public education, quotas for trade licenses, and the permission to monopolize certain industries. Furthermore, this constitution banned all non-Malay peoples from ever serving as Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Obviously, this “social contract” between the Chinese, Indian, and Malay Malaysians stirred debate from the moment it was established. Many Chinese and Indian peoples felt that they were being treated unfairly, as second-class citizens, even though they had been in Malaysia since the early 1800’s. This ethnic tension played out in violent terms in May 1969, after the Chinese-dominated opposition parties such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP), made significant gains in the preceding

parliamentary election. On May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1969, race riots broke out as infuriated Malays attacked Chinese members of a victory parade for the DAP that was routed through central Kuala Lumpur. This initial fighting began an expansion of race riots that would spread throughout the West Coast of the Malaysian peninsula over the next three days, eventually leaving some 200 Malaysians dead. In response, the executive branch of government suspended Parliament and governed on its own until 1971, when it subsequently passed a constitutional amendment called the Sedition Act, making it illegal to discuss Article 153 of the Constitution.

In 1970, the Malaysian government created the “New Economic Policy,” or NEP, which initiated further preferential treatment of the ethnic Malays. Enacted to equalize the economic statuses of poor rural Malays with their more wealthy urban counterparts, the bill expanded earlier government sponsorship of the Malay ethnic group to include preferential treatment for such things as bids for business contracts, social policies, entry into educational institutions, discounts for purchasing houses, and media policies. In effect, the New Economic Policy created institutional ethnic divide in Malaysia that remains today. In fact, racial segregation between the Malays, Indians, and Chinese has become such a large part of the political, economic, and social landscape of Malaysia that the government has recently begun to spend large sums of money on a nationwide campaign calling for a “Bangsa Malaysia,” or single, ‘Malaysian race,’ to inspire solidarity and national unity among its ethnic groups, even as it continues to implement the Malay-favoring government policies that created such vividly felt distinctions.

Because ethnic identity in Malaysia has been institutionally formalized, it presents a unique case study for exploring the manifestations of Chinese ethnicity in a

diaspora community. The use of the term ‘diaspora’ here is indeed telling of the situation in which the Chinese Malaysian students in my study find themselves—they are technically ‘home’ in Malaysia, as they were all born within the nation, and yet maintain a feeling of being ‘separate’ or away from one’s home. Although they no longer consider China home, they remain diasporic in the sense that continual ethnic discrimination in Malaysia has made them feel that this ‘isn’t their rightful place,’ and thus they remain on the margins. Indeed, because Malaysia is a nation in which one’s ethnic identity is a category that can and has been used against certain minority populations in favor of a Muslim majority, it is especially important to understand the techniques used by the Chinese Malaysians to continue to assert their ethnic identities in spite of the obstacles they face. In understanding the various ways in which Malaysian Chinese maintain, transform, and understand their ethnic identities in their daily lives, this research gives voice to Chinese Malaysians, whose experiences are increasingly presented in a monolithic and superficial manner by the Malaysian government.

This research comes at an especially poignant time in the history of Malaysian ethnic relations, as last year’s elections brought a political “revolution” of sorts, with the opposition parties gaining unprecedented numbers in the Malaysian national and state parliaments. Indeed, the election results, which left the Malay-dominated *Barisan Nasional* parties of Malaysia with less than 2/3rds of the seats in national parliament for the first time in over three decades, have prompted some political analysts to claim that a “new Malaysian identity,” is forming (Azly Rahman, Mar.11, 2008) that minimizes the racial differences. An example of this multi-ethnic movement is “The People’s Party” or PR, which is comprised of various groups of

Malaysians with diverse interests and perspectives—from Islamists to a Chinese socialist party—who are all unified by their viewpoint that the Barisan Nasional has not served the interests of the Malaysian people well. Many of the strong voices in the PR are young people, who seek more openness and equity in Malaysia. In light of such radical political shifts, it is an imperative time to research the possible shifts in the ethnic identities that have been so politicized throughout Malaysian history as well and explore in particular how those identities have come to have meaning among young Chinese Malaysians.

### Chinese Ethnic Identity in Modern Malaysia

The highly politicized and overt ethnic categorization process that has characterized Malaysia throughout its history may lead some to assume that the Chinese Malaysian ethnicity is easily defined and delineated. However, in modern Malaysia, the reality is far more complex, and political definitions of ethnicity are merely one of multiple factors that influence the meaning of being Chinese Malaysian. The Malaysian Chinese have, in actuality, been a diverse group since their arrival in Malaysia during the colonial era, migrating from areas of the Chinese mainland that were distinct geographically, culturally, and linguistically (Cartsens, 2005:1). Moreover, their experiences within Malaysia differed depending on the geographic regions where they settled and the resources they had or had not brought with them from China. Certainly, the experiences of rich Chinese businessmen, seeking to expand their profits in a growing Southeast Asian economy, were far removed from those of Chinese migrants who may have come to Malaysia upon the urging of the British colonial administrators with little money or as indentured servants brought to work in the tin mines. Moreover, women, who followed their husbands out of China,

took very different gendered roles in their new homes than did their husbands (Jiemen, 2003). Thus, even first generation Malaysian Chinese were divided by factors of class, gender, occupation, and dialect. Now, more than five generations later, the modern Malaysian Chinese community continues to be separated not only by these original forms of diversity, but also by the conflicting pulls of new religious (or secular) factions, the influence of Western media and culture, and rural versus urban lifestyles as Malaysia becomes increasingly industrialized. It shall now be useful to discuss some of these new dividing factors in more detail, and to display how they work together to create a vastly diverse, and continually shifting, notion of Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Urbanization, Globalization, and Geographical Divide Among Modern Malaysian Chinese

Since the passing of the New Economic Policy in the 1970's, rural to urban migration has become a major factor in the Malaysian political, social, and economic landscape, affecting people of all ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, Malaysia has been transformed from a country that was three-fourths rural in 1950 to predominantly urban in 2000 (Thompson, 2003). While this shift has been mostly due to the relocation of rural Malay populations into urban centers, the process of urbanization has affected Chinese and Indian Malaysians as well (Means 1991; Lee and Ackerman 1988). Indeed, immediately following the passage of the New Economic Policy, Malays began flooding into urban areas that had originally been dominated by the Chinese. Thus, the urbanization that has occurred in the past fifty years of Malaysian history has had the effect of forcing those Chinese Malaysians who had originally been isolated from Malays in highly segregated rural villages or Chinese-dominated urban

areas to interact daily with the rapidly growing urban Malay population (Wilford, 2006: 91). The Chinese themselves had been present in Malaysian urban centers since the Malaysian Emergency (1948-1960), in which a group of mostly Chinese rebels called the Malaysian Communist Party launched a guerilla war against the British Commonwealth. In response, the British had employed a plan to separate the mostly Chinese insurgents from supporters among their community, thus forcing the relocation of 500,000 rural Malaysians, including 400,000 Chinese Malaysians, into guarded camps called "New Villages." Ironically, these new villages were subsequently embraced by Malaysians, who became content with the better living standards in the villages, and were given money and ownership of their own land. Indeed, it was this early forced movement into urban centers and out of the rural villages that gave the Chinese the economic 'leg up' that has been largely touted by rural Malays as justification for the NEP affirmative action policies.

As urbanization caused more inter-ethnic interaction between urban residing Chinese and Malays, the influence of Western and Chinese trading partners also began to take shape in Malaysia. By the 1980's and 1990's, Malaysia had developed strong transnational relations with many nations around the globe including the English-speaking countries of the West, as well as China. The influence of this global outlook could be seen in the steadily growing, westernized middle-class consumer culture, as well as in numerous examples of media, dress-styles, and foods derived from overseas countries (Cartsens, 2005). The signs of globalization can be readily seen today in the American fast-food chains like A&W Root Beer, Pizza Hut, and McDonalds that line the streets of any Malaysian urban area, as well as in the consistent demand by Chinese Malaysians for Hong Kong news and cinema. Thus,



while the internet has made such global influence readily available to even those Malaysians who reside in fairly rural *kampungs*, or rural villages, those Malaysians living in urban environments have been far more exposed to the effects of globalization and Westernization than their rural counterparts (Wilford. 2006: 91). Moreover, class has become a factor in this ‘outward-looking’ trend in modern Chinese Malaysians, as many upper-class Chinese seek to send their sons and daughters overseas to English-speaking countries for their college educations—a result of the Malay-favoring quotas regarding admission to most universities throughout Malaysia.

These modern factors of urbanization, globalization, and the development of a middle-class in Malaysia have come together to create what actually has been documented all over Asia—an urban-rural divide (Knight et al., 2004). Indeed, in Malaysia as elsewhere, economic development signified the beginnings of a split between the nation’s urban and rural residents, leaving rural populations with lower economic stability, and less access to education, technological resources, and healthcare than their urban counterparts (Kassim and Noor, 1997; Knight and Song, 1999). Such unequal access to education and the internet has also created an even broader separation between the ‘Westernized’ urban Malaysians, and the more ‘insular’ rural Malaysians.

This division has been noted within various anthropological studies specifically on Chinese Malaysian communities as well. (LoGerfo, 1996; Thompson, 2003). Such studies have produced several generalized characteristics that serve to identify the urban and rural Chinese groups. Those Chinese who live in rural communities have been characterized as a population with working-class status,

modest educational attempts, a narrow-minded focus on kampung life with little regard for national or global politics, and an inability or distaste for interaction with members of other ethnic groups due to language and cultural barriers (Strauch, 1981). The urban Chinese, alternatively, have been defined as a group to be highly educated, English-speaking, capitalistic, secularized or Christian, and highly Westernized, often traveling to the West for their education. The urban Chinese, because they have more experience interacting with Western peoples and Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds, are thought to have an ethnically broader group of friends and confidants, whereas rural Chinese are purported to have very little contact with 'outsiders' at all, often understanding them mostly through hearsay and stereotype (Strauch, 1981).

#### Creating an Islamic Nation: Shifting Religious and Gender Roles in Chinese Malaysian Lives

In the above section I discussed how globalization and modernization in Malaysia since the 1970's has created a distinction between urban and rural Chinese Malaysians, who are separated by factors of class, occupation, dialect, and schooling. In this section I shall address how the Malaysian government, and especially Malay officials, responded to such modernization. In particular, I highlight how an increasing Islamic fundamentalism within Malaysia has threatened the freedom of non-Malay populations and subsequently changed the gendered and religious situations of Chinese Malaysians.

## Religion and Ethnicity in Modern Malaysia

As addressed in the previous section, Malaysia came into contact with Western influences more and more throughout the past four decades. Indeed, Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's Prime Minister from 1981 until 2003, utilized notions of Western capitalism and infrastructure in his attempt to modernize Malaysia by the year 2020. Yet, as Malaysia achieved modernity in the 1980's and 1990's, the Malaysian government became more cautious about adopting Western ideologies, and instead became ardent about maintaining its Malay values. Government officials began to implement Islamic values into government policies and laws, having the effect of mainstreaming Malay culture (Houben, 2003). To display their Islamic "piety" the Malaysian government began to funnel most of its funds into strictly Malay organizations instead of spreading the funds equally among all Malaysian ethnic groups. As such, Chinese and Indian primary vernacular schools, which had been prevalent in Malaysia since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, received less and less funding, even though some ninety-five percent of all non-Malay young received their educations through such private schools (Malaysian Educational Statistics, 1995). Moreover, the Malaysian government began to allot only miniscule amounts of funds for non-Malay religious buildings and instead threw most of its financial weight behind building new Islamic buildings (Ackermen and Lee, 1988). Even more controversial was the fact that the government began to tear down Hindu and Buddhist temples to build mosques or government buildings in their place (Bukhari, 2006).

Such political actions have made Chinese Malaysians in Malaysia increasingly aware that to survive politically as an ethnic group in Malaysia they must maintain a heightened consciousness of their ethnic identity (Ackerman and Lee 1988). Because of the threat posed by an increasingly Islamic state, Chinese Malaysians were

impelled to cling ever more tightly to their own traditional ethnic values. This “ethnic belt-tightening” affected the religious experiences of Chinese Malaysians by making them more self-conscious about enacting “authentic” Chinese traditions (Maira, 1999). As the Malay population was encouraged to practice Islam more ardently in its everyday life, so too were the Chinese and Indian populations inspired to more closely adhere to their own “idealized” ethnic and religious traditions. Such emphasis on practicing “pure” Chinese culture created divisions within the Chinese Malaysian ethnic group, as some Malaysian Chinese failed or chose not to adhere to the newly strict Chinese ethnic boundaries in Malaysia. For example, in the heightened religious environment of modern Malaysia, many Chinese people who choose to practice a religion besides the traditional ‘Chinese Religion’ (with elements of Buddhism and local folk religion) have been effectively ostracized and considered ‘less Chinese’ (Tan, 1983). This is especially true for the Christian Chinese Malaysians, who usually speak English and practice Western lifestyles, and are thus isolated from the religious and linguistic connections that create cultural cohesion among more traditional Chinese Malaysians (Ackerman and Lee, 1983).

#### Gender and Ethnicity in Modern Malaysia

Alternatively, as the Malaysian government has become increasingly concerned with maintaining its Malay values, issues of gender inequality have become all the more important for Malaysians of all ethnicities. Notions of cultural piety have been placed on the shoulders of Malaysian women, who are expected to follow Islamic moral codes, regardless of whether they are Malay or not. Women are now expected to follow strict rules regarding their sexual chastity, unmarried couples have been arrested for residing in close proximity, and women are no longer free to dress in tight

fitting clothing (Maira, 1999). Moreover, because women have been considered the preservers of culture, Chinese females in Malaysia have been increasingly pressured to be “ethnically” conservative and thus are torn between fulfilling feminine ideals of Malay and Chinese culture simultaneously (Pyke and Johnson, 2003). Thus, because femininity and cultural identity are intertwined, the increased emphasis on ethnic identity in modern Malaysia has created drastic differences in the experiences of Chinese Malaysian males and females. The next section shall highlight the ways in which ethnicity has been discussed academically in a more global context.

#### Literature Review: Ethnic Identity in Malaysia and Abroad

Much of the early literature written about ethnic identity was based upon research in a few, very unique, Western polyethnic cultures such as the United States of America. (Nagata, 1974) Due to this focus on Western systems of ethnicity, there was the development of certain assumptions that have been challenged by more recent anthropological work. One of the major assumptions of the early work on ethnicity concerned the processes of assimilation and acculturation. Researchers commonly adhered to an “assimilationist model”(see Park, 1950; Wirth, 1945) of ethnicity that claimed society to be split into two groups—“the ethnics” and the “non-ethnics.” Researchers such as Glazer and Moynihan (1963) and Fischman (1966) produced studies observing the rate at which certain ethnic identifiers have been ‘shed’ in order to assimilate into an assumedly ‘dominant,’ and therefore, ‘non-ethnic’ culture. Such research has painted any adherence to ethnic identity as merely a failure to assimilate. Much of the early writings on ethnic identity and ethnic boundaries adopted a ‘unilinear’ vision of ethnic transformation, with the ultimate goal as complete assimilation into a politically and economically dominant culture. Furthermore, the

boundaries between such ethnic and majority groups were presented as static and highly visible, and situations which blur such ethnic boundaries have been considered psychologically confusing events for all persons involved, causing personal disorganization or even neurosis (Stonequist, 1937; Park, 1950). Such assumptions were based on the belief that oscillation between ethnic memberships is ‘undesirable,’ and even mentally ‘unhealthy.’

These early definitions of ethnic identity have been challenged within the Malaysian context. Unlike the ‘assimilation-based’ societies of the West, Malaysia had been considered in early anthropological literature, as an example of a “pluralist” society (Wirth,1945), in which multiple “ethnic groups” vie for political dominance without an ‘ethnically neutral’ group into which all other ethnic groups are aiming to enter. Instead, pluralist societies like Malaysia were thought to consist of many different ethnic groups that interact with one-another without claims of dominance or subordination, and in which there is little expectation of eventual assimilation or cultural submergence.(Furnivall,1939) Moreover, the divides between ethnic groups in pluralist societies were not seen as “static,” as researcher Barth asserts in saying that “even where stable ethnic group structures and boundaries exist, a flow of individuals between groups can take place” (1970: 211).

This supposed ‘lack’ of a dominant group in pluralist societies has often led to the argument that there is no danger of forced assimilation, or ideological ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Malaysia, an argument that is now seen as misrepresentative of the post-colonial relations in Malaysia. Early literature which claimed Malaysia to be a completely pluralist society is now outdated and is proven wrong by the continued implementation of Malay-favoring political policies (Nagata, 1974). This idea of

equal partnership among all ethnic groups in a 'pluralist' Malaysia is largely a façade, and this study shall note how continuing notions of the Malay ethnic group as the indigenous 'bumiputeras' (sons of the soil) of Malaysia have relegated those of Chinese and Indian ethnicities to a status of marginalization, or '*kaum pendatangs*' (migrant communities). Therefore, while Malaysia does not fit into the assimilation-based model of ethnic relations, so too does it fall short of being categorized completely as a pure 'pluralist' society, as it remains a country of *ketuanan Melayu*, or Malay supremacy.

A second assumption in traditional literature about ethnic identity is the commonly accepted position known as "primordialism"(Tong Chee Kiong, 2006). Clifford Geertz is usually credited with the formation of this primordial concept regarding ethnicity (Jenkins, 1997). Geertz's primordial theory of ethnicity is summarized by Tong Chee Kiong when he says "Geertz believes that primordial ties or attachments are the basis of individual identity"... "such primordial ties 'stem' from the 'givens'...these congruities of blood, speech, customs, and so on"(2006). The primordial view of ethnicity sees it as something "deeply rooted, given at birth, and largely unchangeable" (van den Berghe, 1978). Because the primordial stance considers ethnic identity to be defined at birth, two of the most important 'ethnic signifiers' according to this stance are physical attributes and one's name (Issacs 1975). Researchers have begun to challenge this primordial position regarding ethnic identity, claiming that it offers a too static view of ethnicity, and ignores any variability that may exist within an ethnic group. Such challengers have instead proposed what is known as the 'situational' view of ethnic identity. Unlike primordialism, the situationalist stance argues that ethnic identity is fundamentally

fluid, changing in different social situations (Okamura 1981). One main tenet of such an approach argues that actors essentially ‘create’ their own individual ethnic identities, and are able to break away from or blend such ties with those from another culture at will (Bhabha, 1990). Although situationalism has been lauded for its inclusion of individual agency in its concept of ethnic identity formation, it has been criticized for ignoring the actor’s sense of permanence to his ethnicity and for downplaying the emotional aspects of ethnic identity (Hutchinson and Smith 1996). Thus, critics of situationalism have noted that while it freed ethnic subjects from being stamped with the ‘essential identities’ posited by earlier anthropological work, it nevertheless created a kind of ‘anything goes’ atmosphere in which all culturally defined structure or pattern is rendered a theoretical fiction, made up by the researcher, and made meaningless in the face of innumerable variables that are present in each ethnic person’s life.

A few researchers have sought to create a fusion of the primordial and situational perspectives of ethnic identity by including both the permanent aspects of ethnicity and those that are constructed situationally. Rather than viewing situationalism and primordialism as “mutually exclusive” ideologies, researchers have opted to define ethnic identity as something that has both “core” and “peripheral” dimensions, which are considered static and fluid respectively (Tong, 2006). Similarly, ethnic identity formation has been posited as an “ongoing constructive process,” negotiated both internally by members of an ethnic group, and externally through interaction with members of a surrounding culture (Nagel, 1994). Eric C. Thompson (2003: 420), specifically writing about Malaysia, has combined the structure of primordialism with the individualism of post-modernist situationalism by positing



ethnic identity as one of numerous ‘fields of identity,’ or ‘objective layers of experience’ that interact uniquely within each individual to shape his world view. Thompson claims that ‘layers of experience’--factors such as a person’s gender, class, religious affiliation, and geography--all interact with his ethnic history to create a unique experience of his or her own ethnicity. It is Thompson’s notion of ethnic identity as both structured and individualized through interactions with other ‘fields of identity’ which shall be drawn upon in this thesis. Moreover, this concept shall be useful in highlighting how Shu Fang and John, two subjects who inhabit a single objective definition as ‘Chinese Malaysian,’ actually subjectively experience their ethnic identities in varied ways, governed especially by their different gendered, classed, religious, and geographic backgrounds.

In the next few chapters, I discuss the qualitative study which I conducted to obtain a better understanding of the subjective experience of being Chinese in contemporary Malaysian society. In Chapter 3, I will describe the design of my study and the unique characteristics of my subject group and setting. Chapter 4 will be a report of the results of my study. Finally, Chapter 5 will present a discussion of these results and their implications for further research.

## **Chapter 3**

### **METHODS**

The data collection for this research on Chinese Malaysian ethnicity began in Spring of 2008, when I was one of twenty-one University of Delaware students to participate in a innovative videoconference course called “Young, Privileged, and Global,” led by Professor Patricia Sloane-White. This videoconference course connected our class with twenty-one Indian and Chinese Malaysian students from the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. For three months, university students from different sides of the globe met and corresponded on issues such as family values, gender roles, middle-class culture, Americanization, and race and ethnicity. I view these first few months of videoconferencing with Malaysian students as background work for my subsequent fieldwork in Malaysia, and the experience privileged me with a pre-existing network of twenty-one Chinese and Indian Malaysian subjects for my field-based study. After conducting two months of further background research during the summer of 2008, I conducted the fieldwork portion of this study over a one month period from July, 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008 through August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. During this month of fieldwork, the initial subject group of twenty-one Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman students whom I had met during the videoconference course was expanded to include other Chinese and Indian Malaysians, usually the friends, family members, and acquaintances of these original 21 subjects.

The ethnographic portion of this research consisted of several different anthropological techniques referred to in the discipline as “participant observation,” which asks the researcher to make unstructured but ‘focused’ observations of subjects in their natural settings. This procedural component and my subsequent analyses are based on the tenets of a qualitative research tradition known as Naturalism.

Naturalism, as defined by Esterberg (2002), is a tradition which seeks to understand social actors “in their own terms,” and asks the researcher to “observe as carefully and accurately as possible, and to present the stories of those being studied in their own voices.” Practically, what this meant for me in Malaysia was that I conducted unstructured and casual observations and conversations in settings such as mamak stalls (common food stalls), classrooms, marketplaces, and temples. I also attended wedding ceremonies, religious functions, and home visits with some of my subjects to contextualize my experiences with them in more personalized domestic and religious settings. During these ‘focused’ observations I did not use formal interview scripts, but did often employ unstructured individual and group interviews, as time and opportunity allowed. I did not use formal interviews because of the fact that much of my research was done informally, with subjects my own age, but also because I felt that the sensitive nature of ethnicity in Malaysia would make subjects less likely to respond if I was writing their responses down. Each observation was carefully recorded in a field journal at the end of each day, which I kept in a safe in my hotel room when it was not with me.

Other methods that I employed included the gathering of life histories, focus group discussions, site visits, material culture collection (e.g., restaurant menus,

personal artifacts and photographs), and image capturing in digital and conventional forms.<sup>2</sup>

While the issue of Chinese ethnic identity in Malaysia remained the focus of my participant observation and interview experiences, subsidiary issues such as gender differences, middle-class lifestyle, globalization, generational differences, and inter-ethnic tensions were addressed as well. Examples of questions that were examined during my fieldwork included but were in no way limited to the following: “What role does religion play in your expression of ethnic identity?” “Do you speak a Chinese dialect at home?” “How would you say attending vernacular school affected your success in national secondary schools?” and “How is your definition of Chinese different (or similar) to your grandmother’s definition?”

The data that I collected from Indian Malaysian subjects, while being relevant in some cases for my analysis of the Chinese Malaysian experience, was ultimately used only as contextual information, and was not central to this analysis. This peripheral inclusion of Indian Malaysian subjects rather than a focus on both Chinese and Indian Malaysians or specifically on Indian Malaysians was an analytical choice made during my field-stay for two reasons. The first reason was related to setting in that the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman is a majority Chinese Malaysian

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<sup>2</sup> Digital footage was captured with a Cannon ZR 850 digital video camcorder. I used the camcorder solely as an analytical tool, for later use by myself and my thesis advisor, and thus the video footage that I collected with this instrument is not for public viewing. The camcorder was not used as an individual interview recorder, but instead, was used to capture moments of participant observation that I felt may be useful in subsequent analysis. All potential subjects of videotaped segments verbally gave their permission to be videotaped before any shooting began.

school. The Chinese majority of UTAR made it easier for me to gather Chinese Malaysian subjects than Indian Malaysian subjects, and thus I became more familiar with issues specifically surrounding Chinese Malaysian ethnicity, rather than Indian Malaysian ethnicity. The second reason I decided to focus mainly on Chinese ethnicity specifically was because of my expanding awareness of the huge variety of experiences present within even one ethnic group in Malaysia, prompting my subsequent decision that, in the short amount of time I had in the field, it would be more productive to focus on one ethnic situation rather than two.

#### Setting and Subject Population

All of my initial subjects were drawn from the twenty-one Chinese and Indian students attending the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. This university holds a unique place in Malaysia's educational history, and has potential implications for the type of Chinese person in my subject group. The higher education system in Malaysia has been segregated by ethnicity since the 1970s, when the New Economic Policy brought Bumiputera affirmative action policies that drastically reduced the number of Indian and Chinese Malaysians able to enroll in public universities throughout the nation. Indeed, such policies led to a drastic drop of the number of Chinese in Malaysian universities, from 49% in 1969 to 30% in 1985, while Bumiputera enrollment rose from 29% to 63% during that period (Teoh, 2007). Moreover, even within the Malay population, admittance into local public universities has proven a difficult task, as public universities have limited capacity, and have been estimated to accept less than half of every 100 applicants, regardless of qualification (Wilkinson, and Yussof, 2005). Thus, as of 1995, an estimated 50,600 Malaysian students were enrolled in overseas universities, most of them being privately funded Chinese and

Indian Malaysians. However, as Malaysia underwent an economic downturn in the mid-1990's, and the prices of attending foreign universities went up simultaneously, training in overseas universities became too expensive for even upper-middle class Malaysian students, thus forcing the Malaysian government to encourage greater use of the private universities in Malaysia (Molly Lee 1994, 1999). Subsequently, the passing of the *Private Higher Education Act* in 1996 marked a drastic political shift in which the Malaysian government not only allowed private universities in Malaysia to give out certified degrees and diplomas, but also provided significant grant money in helping such private universities to launch and expand. Moreover, political parties themselves became affiliates with numerous private universities, and the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman is one such university. Founded in 2002, UTAR represents one of the first 'Chinese' universities as it was given a starting grant by the Malaysian government, as it is sponsored by the Malaysian Chinese Association. Since its inception in 2002, UTAR has expanded rapidly, going from a university that offered a mere eight Bachelor's programs and an initial intake of just over 400 students, to now boasting an enrollment of over 17,000 students with more than 30 courses (UTAR official website, 16 February 2009 ).

UTAR's affiliation with a political party, and its status as a private university, has many implications. Firstly, because it is associated with the Malaysian Chinese Association, it is widely known as a Chinese university, although it officially allows Malaysians of all races to enroll or teach in its courses. Moreover, because Malays are far more likely to get into local public universities, they usually choose not to attend private universities like UTAR, since government funded public universities are able to charge a significantly lower tuition than those of privately funded

universities. Even among the few other government-associated ‘Chinese’ universities in Malaysia, UTAR is one of the most expensive to attend.<sup>3</sup>

Because of its historical, economic, and ethnic positioning my subject population is most represented by Chinese and Indian Malaysian university students who may not be able to get into the more renowned national public universities. This is usually because of a lack of the extraordinary test scores needed for non-Malays to enter into public universities, or because those national schools failed to offer them their preferred course of study. Moreover, UTAR students must be able to afford to the 40,000 ringgit tuition (approximately US\$12,000) for their private university education, but generally would be considered unable to pay the fees for study in private overseas universities (up to 500,000 ringgit)( Wilkinson, and Yussof, 2005). Thus, the socio-economic positioning of students at UTAR can be estimated to be in the range from the lower middle-class to middle-middle class, with those Chinese Malaysians who are poorer attending the more government subsidized universities like KTAR and TARC, and those who are more endowed traveling overseas for their educations. However, a National Higher Education Fund set up by the government may allow even the poorer Chinese and Indian Malaysians to afford a UTAR education.

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<sup>3</sup> UTAR was given only a 50 million ringgit initial grant from the government rather than continual funding, and now must gain the remainder of its funding through donation and tuition, while its competitor universities, such as KTAR and TARC, serve the same student pool but are far more subsidized by the government (Pua, 2006)

### Shu Fang and John Field Experiences

Now that I have described my general subject group, I shall describe in more detail the field experiences and methods I utilized with the two subjects highlighted in my results section, Shu Fang, and John. My early field experiences with both of these subjects took place mainly on the UTAR campus in Petaling Jaya, Kuala Lumpur. I first spoke with Shu Fang while visiting her group of interns on campus, where she invited me to eat lunch with her and her friends at a Chinese section of Kuala Lumpur called SS2. John and I met during a Public Relations course that I sat in on during my third day of fieldwork in Malaysia. During the first week of fieldwork I continued to meet with Shu Fang and John in the university setting, while I gained my footing in Malaysia. After the first week however, most of my interactions with Shu Fang and John took place outside of the campus, in various areas around Kuala Lumpur, and even up and down the West Coast of Malaysia. It was in these interactions off campus that the true differences began to appear. The first difference was in where such interactions occurred. Whereas Shu Fang took me to places around Kuala Lumpur that were mostly designated as “Chinese” in atmosphere and population, John usually took me to more ethnically diverse settings, based mostly on cosmopolitan consumption and culture than ethnic culture. For example, while Shu Fang and I would take the bus to working-class Chinese neighborhoods to eat a, say, three dollar lunch, John would invite me to the theatre in English for a fee of twenty five U.S. dollars. Another difference can be discerned in that John and my own interactions were usually as a pair, whereas Shu Fang never invited me out alone, and instead usually invited me only as a member of a group. Finally, while Shu Fang took me to her apartment in Kuala Lumpur, John, who lived at home with his family, never introduced me to them.



## **Chapter 4**

### **RESULTS**

This thesis seeks to personalize the experience of how young people identify as a Chinese Malaysian in today's fluid and globalized world, and in a nation where issues of ethnic identity are so apparent as to be tangible, but are applied to groups that are perhaps more heterogeneous than ever before. Thus, this thesis shall emphasize diversity of experience rather than totality in its grounded description of two Chinese Malaysian experiences. To do so, the results of this study shall be presented through a recounting of my own experiences with two young Chinese Malaysian UTAR students, whom I came to know well during my fieldwork. I have chosen to present these two 'case studies' not because of any claim that they reflect the experiences of all Chinese Malaysians, but rather, because they depict how general constructions of class, geographic location, religion and gender, intertwine with ethnicity to create a wide diversity of subjective experiences within the Malaysian Chinese population. Drawing on participant observation, interviews, and life-histories, I seek to demonstrate how such structured social strata of class, gender, religious affiliation, and geography influence the individual understandings of Chinese Malaysians.

The first of these narratives shall introduce Shu Fang, a 21-year-old psychology major at UTAR, who comes from a working-class family in a rural farming village to study in the capital. While her experiences are uniquely her own, they do present issues central to many rural-to-urban students, who often are

navigating the semi-opposing pulls of western-capitalist culture in Kuala Lumpur and those of the more traditional Chinese culture that they experience in their hometown village life.

The second case study describes the experiences of John, a 21-year-old journalism student, whose experiences growing up wealthy and English-educated in cosmopolitan Kuala Lumpur reflect issues pertaining to urban ethnic identity formation-- a situation made complex by the abundance of values and life-ways that exist within urban communities. Through an exploration of the experiences of Shu Fang and John, I hope to highlight not only the ways in which Chinese‘ness’ is expressed within Malaysia, but also to depict the ways in which social structures of class, gender, religion, and geographic location create individualized ethnic identities.

My results section is organized in the following manner. First, I describe the life-histories of Shu Fang, and then John. Subsequently, I shall discuss their stories in relation to the issues of class, religion, and gender in modern Malaysia, respectively. The academic literature on such sociological strata in Malaysia and Asian society in general will be utilized as part of my analysis, and a discussion of such literature precedes my direct findings on Shu Fang and John in this section. Finally, I will address the geographical divide between Shu Fang and John that encompasses such gendered, classed, and religious issues and also serves to create unique subjective ethnic identities.

#### Shu Fang: Village Girl in the Big City

I first met Shu Fang during the Spring of 2008, while we both were taking the class “Young, Privileged, and Global,” albeit from different sides of the world. She was not a memorable character from the class, but I would later realize that this

was perhaps due to her inability to speak English as well as some of the more ‘Westernized’ students. Yet, while I barely remembered Shu Fang at all when I re-encountered her in person on the second day of my fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur, she would ultimately become one of my closest confidants and greatest sources of information. During my research, Shu Fang had entered her last semester of study, and was in the throes of an internship that was necessary for her to receive a degree in Psychology. Nevertheless, Shu Fang was ardent about helping me obtain data for my research and seemed generally excited for me to document her world. She began to invite me along on her daily activities, and I eagerly accepted. Over the next four weeks of fieldwork I shadowed Shu Fang as much as possible--eating with her, attending courses with her, shopping with her, riding the commuter train with her, and eventually visiting her apartment in the city. I came to know her best friends Pui Yee and Yilin, and even took a weekend trip with the trio as they headed to Pui Yee’s home in Ipoh, a town about two hours north of the capital. Through these experiences I learned much about Shu Fang and her family.

Shu Fang was born in Penang, the third largest city in Malaysia, characterized by its majority Chinese population. During her infancy her family moved to a small village within the limits of a town called Bentong, which lies about 80 km north of Kuala Lumpur. Bentong was originally a tin mining town, but now its economy consists mostly of timber factories, food industries and an electronic components assembly factory. Shu Fang’s father is a produce farmer who sells his goods in local markets, while Shu Fang’s mother stays at home to take care of Shu Fang’s three siblings, although according to Shu Fang she often helps her father harvest the fruit--a result of the hardworking nature that Shu Fang claims is inbred in

Chinese Hakka women. Although Shu Fang's parents are hardworking, she acknowledged that they have often faced financial hardships, as crop-growing is a capricious occupation, subject to the whims of the weather. Neither of Shu Fang's parents inherited wealth as their own parents had emigrated from China as indentured servants who worked in tin mines for minimal pay.

During the time of my stay, Shu Fang's family was undergoing another downward transition in their financial standing, as Shu Fang's mother had recently developed brain cancer, and her medical bills, combined with the effect of her being unable to tend the crops, had taken an inescapable toll on the family's savings. These rather meager economic conditions had not yet shaken Shu Fang's plans for her future, as she had managed to obtain government loans to get her through her college. However, she now plans to return home after obtaining her degree to help her family cope with her mother's illness, which would put any aspirations for work as a corporate psychologist on hold. Shu Fang viewed these hardships as being an integral part of being Chinese in Malaysia. Moreover, Shu Fang's gender is an inescapable factor in shaping her reaction to her mother's illness, and in turn is affecting her career trajectory.

Shu Fang attended a Chinese primary school for the first six years of her education, and subsequently attended a Malay secondary school (a "Sekolah Kebangsaan" or national school) As such, Shu Fang is much more comfortable speaking in Mandarin or Cantonese, than English or Malay, and speaks only Mandarin while at home or with her friends. Shu Fang is also a fairly avid believer in traditional Chinese folk religion, and she made it her personal mission to show me local Chinese temples while I was in Malaysia, teaching me how to properly light joss-sticks and pay

respect to one's Chinese ancestors. Even Shu Fang's friends were often impressed by her detailed knowledge of Chinese folk-religion, as the many gods and their stories that make up the Chinese religion in Malaysia seemed confusing to them. Shu Fang's spirituality continued outside of the temple, as she often taught me ancient Chinese herbal remedies for my stomach ailments –which could themselves be owed to Shu Fang's obsession with making me try Chinese delicacies.

### John: The Malaysian Dreaming the American Dream

I first met John while attending a class on Public Relations and Malaysian Media at UTAR. As I was being introduced to the class, a boy in a blue zip-up sweatshirt and the kind of tight jeans that only American rock-stars wear sighed and said “Your country is the best,” in a voice of awe mixed with envy. I had already begun getting used to being lauded simply because I was American, but the level of yearning and awe in his voice took me by surprise. He wasn't simply being polite—he was expressing his honest opinion of America as sort of a dream land, a place of excitement, importance, and opportunity.

As I got to know John more on a personal level, I understood the reasons for his awe. A journalism student, and an idealist rock-star hopeful, John was well-schooled in the ways of the West. One of our first excursions was at an A&W drive thru—the first one in Malaysia John explained. He assumed that I, being American, would enjoy American drinks like ‘root beer,’ rather than any authentic Malaysian drink he could show me. In fact, as John and I became better acquainted as friends and fellow music lovers during my stay in Malaysia, almost every one of our conversations centered on America –its politics (John is a Barack Obama fan, and thinks Malaysia needs a leader like him), its consumerism, and its values (John thinks the freedom and

tenacity of American women is refreshing, but does see a problem with what he sees as loosely bound family structure). John's curiosity for the English-speaking cultures of the West was easily explored throughout his youth because he had attended all Malay and English speaking primary and secondary schools, and had the extra benefit of having a mother who taught English in a national secondary school. Because of this early schooling in English, John reads the news in English, listens to English rock songs, and speaks English to his friends.

Moreover, having grown up within the city limits of Kuala Lumpur, John had been exposed to Western lifestyles and consumer culture from childhood. Most of the settings that I found myself in with John were replicas of what I could experience in America—theatre in English, shopping for name-brand clothing in fancy air-conditioned malls, even going vintage shopping in trendy boutiques. His economic positioning as the son of a well-off banker father and a teacher mother helped him gain access to such Western lifestyles, and many of his closest friends were actually rich enough to study in Western countries—an opportunity John says he would have enjoyed, but he doesn't dwell on, because he plans to travel “out of Malaysia” in the “near future.” Indeed, John's economic status and his fluency in the English language shall dictate his educational future, as he plans to obtain further schooling in Australia, Britain or the United States after working for a couple years as a reporter at Malaysia's largest English-print newspaper, *The Star*--a position he is guaranteed as soon as he graduates from UTAR, and one he secured because of his impeccable English. Thus, John's geographic and class locations seem to have placed him in a secure middle-class position for the foreseeable future.

## Classed Ethnic Identities: Shu Fang and Josh Compared

### The Literature

In recent decades there has been a grand emergence into the minds of both Western and Eastern economists of the seemingly “miraculous” growth of East and Southeast Asian economies, which burgeoned new segments of middle-class populations and bourgeoisie throughout the latter part of the 1970’s, 1980’s, and 1990’s (Robinson and Goodman, 1996). As the economies of countries like China, Malaysia, and Indonesia seemed to grow at exponential rates, the industrial economies of the West were in decline, and analysts began to claim that the next years would bring Asian economic dominance, and that they were in fact the people to watch, imitate, and do business with. Images on television sets began to show a “new” kind of wealth in Asia—one that had less to do with royalty and everything to do with laptop toting, traffic jam commuting, Western suit wearing white-collar workers and consumers. As Robinson and Goodman report in the New Rich in Asia, this new rich have become sort of an amorphous symbol in the global consciousness—a symbol which “means all things to all people” (1996:2). For one, many Western liberals have assumed that just as the new middle classes in Asian countries took on the consumerist buying tendencies of the West, they too would borrow Western notions of liberalism, individualism, democracy, and secularism. Research has shown that there is a certain extent of truth to this—for example middle classes have played an important role in the political transformations in South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, and indeed middle class students were at the heart of the Tiananmen Square protest in China in 1989 (Hewison, 1993).

Other examples have contradicted the notion that there must be some universal secular culture attached to new industrial capitalisms in Asian nations. This

is particularly true in the Malaysian sense, where Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad , one of the key figures in bringing Malaysia into capitalistic modernity during his twenty-two years in office, has asserted that Malaysia is traveling a different path than Western countries. The Malaysian government has increasingly discouraged its citizens against adopting certain ideals and indulgences of the West, and instead has advised its subjects to “look East,” for their cultural and moral values, even as their economic practices shift towards capitalism. Because of a certain extenuated paranoia about becoming too Western as their economic and infrastructural changes occurred, the Malaysian government has become increasingly concerned with conserving its traditional heritage, namely its Malay heritage, and therefore has been ardent about emphasizing its Islamic ideals. Numerous studies have begun to focus on the development of the “New Malay”—a construct that is as much religiously and culturally conservative as it is capitalistically transformative. The “New Malay” is considered the opposite of the old stereotypical Malay—thought to be lazy, and kampung oriented-- and instead is the picture of a skillful, business-oriented urbanite, equipped with all the aggression and political fervor to bring Malaysia into its rightful bright future (Sen and Stivens, 1998). This class of new Malay men and women—while completely consumerist on the outside—is also perhaps more strict in its private practice of Islamic values than ever before.

Thus, much of the research on the emerging Malaysian middle classes has focused upon Malay culture, rather than Chinese or Indian Malaysian culture. This is not to say that there is no literature on Chinese business culture—there has indeed been volumes written on Chinese business practices as Western researchers sought to find a cultural justification for the East and Southeast Asian economic expansions in



the past few decades (Berger and Hsiao, 1988; Hamilton, 1991). This literature proposes some element of a Confusion-style work ethic, or a “Chopstick Culture” as one researcher deemed it, as largely responsible for the sudden economic prosperity of the area (Berger and Hsiao, 1988). Such generalizations are centered on invocations of essentialized notions of Chinese familial values that center on hard work, responsibility, and *guanxi* networking techniques.

*Guanxi*, a key element of Chinese business culture, is a networking system centered on notions of trust (*xinren*) and shared property (*kongsi*) in which business is conducted on a more personal level among businessmen who emphasize familiarity, reciprocity and reliability over any legal or monetary bonds. What this has traditionally meant for Chinese businessmen in Malaysia is that they have not participated in business ventures with anyone outside of their so-called ‘circle of trust,’ including non-Chinese businessmen. As such, notions of Chinese *guanxi* networks have effectively insulated Chinese businesses from other Malaysian businesses, and have stigmatized Chinese capitalists as dangerous, secretive, and even sneaky (Ong and Nonini 1997). Indeed, the system of personalized affiliations within Chinese networks not only were looked upon as unfair ways of doing business, but also were seen as a secret weapon—the hidden gem that buoyed Chinese Malaysian businessmen and made them so successful while the Malay and Indian ethnic groups struggled financially.

### Shu Fang’s Classed Ethnic Understanding

The *guanxi* money culture described above matches my findings on the classed ethnic understandings of Shu Fang. Shu Fang would often claim that her parents’ financial survival was a part of their ‘Chinese’ cultural tendency to work hard

and be responsible with their finances. While Shu Fang's parents were rural entrepreneurs, and not rich by any means, their language and rural location generally ensured that they associated with mostly the ethnic Chinese, and thus, practiced traditional *guanxi*-style business. Indeed, Shu Fang seemed to think that succeeding on their own, without the help from outside government support or the support of non-Chinese business partners, was a depiction of a particularly 'Chinese' way of enduring in spite of dire situations and institutional discrimination.

#### John's Lack of an Ethnic Class Culture

While Shu Fang may have reiterated notions of Chinese Malaysians thriving in closely-knit ethnic networks based on feelings of kinship or shared Chinese identity, other research has begun to show that not all Chinese people living in Southeast Asia feel such ethnic ties when conducting their business. Indeed, Wee, Jacobsen, and Wong (2006) wrote that while large Chinese business conglomerates were more likely to practice traditional 'Chinese ways' of doing business, small and medium scale entrepreneurs within urban centers were more financially tied to their local countries, and were thus less likely to feel part of or to utilize any notion of Chinese kin-based networks. As such, smaller scale Chinese businessmen in Malaysia were often found to have little "ideological attachment to any old country," or its traditional ways of business, because their fortunes and minds were distinctly set in their local economies.

This finding mirrors John's economic reality more so than most literature on Chinese *guanxi* capitalism in that, while he is indeed the son of a Chinese businessman, his father is not part of the elite networks of Chinese businessmen that are highlighted in most literature regarding a 'Chinese Capitalist' culture, and thus

John is not privy to such connections that may have ensured him economic success in a very 'Chinese' way. Instead, John's financial success or failure will be predicated on his ability to navigate the local Malaysian economic plane and interact with multiple ethnic groups in a profit-driven, rather than ethnic-driven, business trajectory. Given that John doesn't fit the ethnicized class culture adhered to by Shu Fang and elite Chinese businessmen, and yet will forever fail to fit into the increasingly Islamicized Malay middle class culture, it may be asked, where does he fit in? It seems that while notions of Chinese Capitalism may have marginalized Chinese businessmen from the Malaysian majority, John's inability to fit within such ethnicized class boundaries marginalizes him from his *own* ethnic group. Thus, John's class seems to have rendered him 'culture-less.'

#### John's Consumer Identity

Here, it is only within the more generalized global consumer culture that Mahatir so firmly claimed did not exist in Malaysia that John seems to most aptly fits. Grewal (2000) describes a transnational consumer culture in which identity formation is based solely on consumption rather than ethnic or national boundaries. As such, economic activities and consumption practices create a shared subjectivity through the interactions between people and their material surroundings (Appadurai 1986, Gottdeiner 2000, Miller et al. 1998). Whereas Shu Fang would display her identity through taking me to the temple or to her family home, John showed me his place of belonging not through any ethnic indicators, but through displaying all the possibilities for consumption in his world. Showing an 'outsider' like myself places of consumption such as Kuala Lumpur's famous ritzy malls, or expensive coffee shops

proved that John referenced himself through the commodities he buys—be it art, theatre, music, or even Western media.

John often differentiated his ‘self’ from what he thought of as more ‘traditional’ Chinese in claiming that his ‘consumption’ of Western media had opened his mind to a world bigger than just the kampung, whereas he criticized rural Malaysians for perpetuating the stereotypes of Chinese people as insular and selfish by not consuming any non-Chinese media or education. Instead, John thought of himself as a global citizen—not because he had ever lived or experienced foreign settings, but because he had consumed foreign culture. However, in centering his subjectivity on notions of middle class consumer-ship alone, John’s ethnic identity is left to be constructed merely by the shallow images of ethnic heritage displayed within government sponsored parades, festivals, and commercials claiming that ethnic diversity and harmony is alive and well in modern Malaysia. Certainly, while the elections of March 2008 indicated that perhaps young middle class Chinese like John are unwilling to accept such superficial representation any longer, John’s ethnic identity as of today could be seen as almost simply a categorization on his identity card. Yet, ironically, as the next section highlights, John’s involvement in the Christian movement within Malaysia, has sufficed as an ‘ethnic identity’ which is based more on shared middle class experiences of non-Muslim urbanites than any genetic ancestry.

### Religious Divisions: Christianity and the Chinese Religion in Malaysia

#### The Literature

As addressed in Chapter Two, the Islamic revivalism that has occurred in Malaysia in the past few decades has forced non-Muslims in Malaysia to have a

heightened sense of religious identity as well. In an environment of urban competition for resources among different ethnic groups, non-Malays have used religious expression as a form of cohesion and political power. The increased emphasis and renegotiation of the traditional Chinese religion and religious symbols in Malaysia can thus be seen as an attempt to reaffirm their ethnic and religious sense of identity and power in an increasingly Muslim environment (Lee and Ackerman, 1988). As such, religion and ethnicity have become even more intertwined, and religion has become a central part of a person's ethnic identity in Malaysia. Indeed, the community networking and cultural reaffirming that occurs through religious functions has been shown to be a key factor in maintaining the Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia in spite of ethnic discrimination (DeBernardi, 2004). This has been shown to be especially true when that religion is the Chinese religion, as it is shown to maintain Chinese community structure and reaffirm traditional Chinese morals and social values (Tan, 1983). The importance placed on practicing traditional Chinese religion among Malaysian Chinese has effectively isolated the Christian Chinese Malaysians that make up almost seven percent of the entire Chinese Malaysian community (Ackerman and Lee, 1988). Yet, because all Christians in Malaysia are non-Malay by definition, they too use their religion as a form of ethnic empowerment.

Traces of Christian influence have existed on the Malayan peninsula since colonial times, when foreign ministries were in charge of Christian institutions (Ackerman and Lee, 1988). Indeed, shortly before Malaysia had received its independence in 1959 there began a process of "indigenizing" Christianity in Malaysia, as foreign ministries began to exert serious effort in training a domestic Malaysian clergy. Such ministries had also set up numerous Christian schools

throughout Malaysia. However, because of the emphasis on maintaining Malay culture after independence, the Malaysian government increasingly regulated the recruitment of foreign Christian missionaries to train Asian ministers, and even began to secularize the Christian schools, effectively leaving them existing as religious schools only in name. Moreover, there began a steady decline in lands available for Christian churches and cemeteries to reside on, as the government allocated even more space for Islamic buildings.

While Christianity is not itself an ethnic identifier, when it is placed in the current Malaysian political situation, in which ethnicity and religion are inseparable, it becomes politicized as a ‘non-Malay’ religion, and therefore Malaysian Christians view their unsatisfactory religious positioning as an *ethnic* issue of non-Malays. As Christians throughout Malaysia have fought back against what they see as a politically hostile environment, they have forged a new religio-ethnic identity—that of the discriminated against non-Malay Christian (Ackerman and Lee, 1988). Ackerman and Lee (1988) argue in Heaven In Transition: Non-Muslim Religious Innovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia, the environment of institutionalized Islamic revivalism in Malaysia has actually worked to consolidate and mobilize the Christian Malaysian population as well, as droves of Chinese and Indian Malaysians joined non-denominational Pentecostal or Charismatic Christian movements that sprouted as a way to unite Christians who were becoming more marginalized in Islamic Malaysia (Nagata, 1999). Indeed, Ackerman and Lee highlight how the Christian community in Malaysia has focused its efforts on forging unity among Christian denominations in its response to post-independence Islamization through creating innovative new ways in which a modern and diverse population of Malaysians can practice the Christian

religion. One way in which they did this was to allow for more informal prayer meetings to occur in personal spaces, such as family homes or local buildings, to circumnavigate the problem of government regulation of official Christian churches.

### John and Christianity: Religion and Ethnicity Intertwined

The politicized religious discrimination against Christians in Malaysia has actually set the stage for the creation of a Christianity that can be practiced in more diverse settings than ever before. Moreover, in an attempt to unite many diverse peoples into one Christian religion that could withstand the attacks of Islamic fundamentalists in Malaysia, the Christian foundation in Malaysia has adopted a willingness to be open to new styles of religious behavior, such as musical performance, poetry, and youth-oriented initiatives, and has adopted English as its dialect of choice. This situation has actually made Christianity an ideal religion for the modern, middle class Malaysian like John, who finds his personalized system of networks and shared identity in this new middle class Christian 'hood,' rather than in any Chinese guanxi network. Christianity in Malaysia has been tailored for middle class consumers, Westernized in their ideologies and lifestyles, as well as in their religion. This new form of Christianity in Malaysia has allowed for a union of John's global class culture and his religious identity. Thus, whereas John's position as a globalized, middle class consumer may have disqualified him from traditional Chinese and Malay capitalist ideologies, they are completely in-line with his role as a Christian, and it is in his Christian networks where John most finds his religious, ethnic, and classed identities intertwined.

### The Role of Chinese Religion in Shu Fang's Ethnic Identity

As discussed in her life-history, Shu Fang is a devout practitioner of traditional Chinese religion and ancestor worship. Her religion is a large part of her ethnic identity as Chinese Malaysian. While the Malay ethnicity, in terms of rules and requirements, is laid out explicitly in the Malaysian constitution, the Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia is more nebulous, and decided mostly by genetic connections or certain Chinese cultural practices. However, as Ian Clark has asserted in his article on ancestor worship in Malaysian Chinese, oftentimes the social behaviors of a person is far more indicative of one's ethnicity than his physiological or genetic makeup, which is not usually on public display (2000). For example, Clark writes how a Chinese person living outside of China must, in essence, *act out* his relation to Chinese ancestors through the act of ancestor worship to acknowledge that he did indeed descend from someone of Chinese origin. It can be argued, then, that Shu Fang's continued participation in traditional Chinese religious activities, especially the act of ancestor worship, represent her expression of her ethnic identity as much as any religious identity.

Her own acknowledgement of this connection of Chinese religion with her Chinese ethnic identity can be seen in her negative reaction to Christian Chinese Malaysians. Shu Fang would often claim that Christian Chinese like John had been corrupted in their struggles to be like the West, and had thus forgotten where (and who) they came from, failing to be culturally pious. This reaction can be seen as a conscious understanding by Shu Fang that the religious practices of Chinese Malaysians are actual physical statements of their connection to Chinese ancestors. Thus Shu Fang presents John's Christianity as an ethnic betrayal in a nation in which



the imminent threat of Islamization makes religious unity among non-Malays an essential tool in saving their ethnic heritages.

### Gendered Ethnic Identities of Shu Fang and John

#### The Literature

Research on gender in Malaysia has generally been Malay-focused and rarely has included gender issues unique to Chinese Malaysians. However, recent work that has been done on gendered formations of ethnic identity in Chinese communities in the diaspora serve to highlight some of the issues pertaining to Shu Fang and John's lives. For example, in a study of Chinese communities and cultural change in Peru, Chicago, and Hawaii, Adam McKeown noted that most Chinese organizations in diaspora communities are held together by patrilineal kinship ties—a fact that creates and reinforces male-only participation in diaspora organizations, thus replicating the male-dominated hegemony that existed in traditional Confucian Chinese society. This reproduction of uneven gendered power relations creates a situation in which it is only the Chinese males who can be part of the 'official' diaspora institutions that often regulate ethnic communities, whereas females must settle for less-official roles in their participation (McKeown, 2001)

The importance of such official versus unofficial roles in diaspora participation is highlighted by researcher Lok Siu (2005), who explains that such diaspora organizations often serve to dictate what the 'ideal' Chinese subject should look like—creating a situation in which males are the deciders of who-and what-is considered the 'ideal subject' in the Chinese diaspora. For example, in her study of a yearly Chinese beauty contest called “La Reina de La Colonia China,” or “The Queen of the Chinese Colony,” held each year by the Convention of Chinese Associations of

Central America and Panama, Lok Siu (2005: 512) depicts how such diasporic Chinese associations, and the events they sponsor (such as the beauty pageant), act as “places where cultural meanings are produced, consumed, and rejected,” and where “structures of power are engaged in their most vital aspects.” In the case of the beauty pageant, the winners reflect a proposed ‘ideal’ feminine subject as decided by the male-dominated Chinese Associations of Central America.

While this male ‘defining’ of an essentialized female has been a conventional concept in feminist literature since Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, it takes on new importance in studies of ethnicity and gender in the diaspora, as women have been called the ‘bearers’ of traditional culture, and have been valorized for their role in its reproduction (Chapkis, 1988). As the old adage goes, “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”— and there has been an inevitable association of women’s roles as mothers with an ardent responsibility for raising ‘culturally pious’ children in the diaspora (Spitzer, 2003). Furthermore, women’s bodies have been objectified to reflect an entire nationality, or a cultural ‘way,’ although women themselves may have little power over such images (Moors, 2000). Because females carry the burden of representing unsullied ethnic tradition, their bodies have often become the canvas upon which clashes between and within cultures are inscribed, and thus, their sexuality has been closely guarded. One must look only to the image of the veiled woman in Islam, or the bound feet of 18<sup>th</sup> century Chinese women, to understand how the female body has been utilized as a cultural articulation. Lok Siu’s Central American beauty contest becomes a “key site” not only in that it reflects a dialogue about what an ‘ideal femininity’ is to the Central America Chinese

community, but also because it reflects their negotiation of the ‘ideal Chinese subject’ as well—in essence equating proper femininity with proper Chinese‘ness.’

Because of this intertwining of femininity with cultural identity, ethnic women are often held to standards that their male counterparts are not. For example, Bao Jiemin’s study (2003) of the rules regarding the marital behaviors of male Chinese immigrants to Thailand and their wives back home in China discusses how the wives of Chinese immigrants were expected to remain chaste and forever loyal to their husbands, while their spouses frequently took on new wives in Thailand or frequented brothels. These marital double-standards reflect deeper contrasting standards in which the measure of how well a female subject represents the ‘authentic ethnic womanhood’ rests upon how ‘loose’ or chaste her sexual behavior is, while a male subject’s ethnic identity is not in danger even if he is sexually promiscuous (Maira, 1999).

That such gendered double standards exist within the Chinese and other ethnic Diasporas is unsurprising given that the ethnic and gendered ideals of such diasporic communities are often based upon the age-old ideologies as unchanged from their ‘distant homelands.’ As Sunaina Maira (1999:49) reported in her work on second generation Indian American youth, there is often a sense by ethnic people’s living in diasporas, that to be ethnically authentic, they must adhere to “essentialized ethnic identities” identical to the ones lived by their ancestors in an attempt to protect the “purity” of their ethnicities against the “corrupting influences” of their new host countries. Because females are expected to carry the burden of representing unsullied ethnic tradition, their sexual behaviors and social roles are often held to gendered standards created centuries ago in patriarchal traditions, regardless of the changing economic, social, or political situations they may find themselves in today.

This has become especially true in the Malaysian case where, as Susan E. Ackerman and Raymond L.M. Lee point out in Heaven in Transition, the increasing political Islamization of the nation since its independence has forced non-Muslim groups to hold more tightly to their own ethnic traditions in an attempt to maintain their ethnic selves in an increasingly Islamic setting (1990). Indeed, Ackerman and Lee brilliantly outline how, in their weary response to Western influences, the competing Malay-oriented political parties of the United Malay National Organization and the more radical Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party have each begun to publicly present themselves as the more “puritanical” of the two, and have increasingly created “moral laws” that govern not only Malays but non-Malays as well. Such moral laws, as well as the increasing regulation and closing of non-Muslim places of worship has created an ironic twist in that non-Muslims Malaysians have begun to more ardently, and in a more public fashion, adhere to their traditional ethnic identities as well (1990:56). Thus, Chinese Malaysian women are now, perhaps more than ever before, expected to closely guard their own chastity, as Chinese Malaysian community as a whole undergoes an ethnic ‘belt-tightening.’

### Gender and Ethnic Identity: Shu Fang

Understandably, living up to these expectations of acting as physical embodiments of ‘pure’ ethnic identity can create obstacles in the lives of many modern ethnic women, and it indeed has an effect on Shu Fang’s life in particular (Maira, 1999; Spitzer, 2003; Johnson and Pyke, 2003). One of the major ways in which this pressure to adhere to this ‘nostalgic culture’ plays out within Shu Fang’s life regards her attempt to adhere to traditional Confucian Chinese gender roles, and especially those regulations regarding care-giving behaviors.

Confucianism is a system of social ethics that has had incalculable importance in the development of Chinese and East Asian culture since its creation in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. by the Chinese philosopher Confucius. While Confucianism is too large a doctrine to discuss in its entirety here, there are a few important concepts that must be highlighted. At the core of Confucianism is the concept of *Li*, or rites, rules of propriety or codes of behavior. In Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom, Fan Hong wrote of *Li* that it had such an influence on the Chinese mentality as to “enclosed the personality of the individual within the parameters of his or her prescribed roles, to the extent that individuality was hardly differentiated from those roles” (1997:5). This strict emphasis on adherence to one’s social roles has extremely important gendered aspects because of the fact that they are based upon the notion of the “Three Bonds”—absolute loyalty and obedience due to the prince from the ministers, from sons to fathers, and from wives to husbands. The family is seen as an extension or an embodiment of society, and each member is expected to place the needs of the larger social organization before his or her own (Chekki, 1998). These demands are framed within the Chinese concept of filial piety, or *xiao*, which demands loyalty and service

to one's elders and ancestors in exchange for their care (Spitzer et al, 2003). Thus the traditional Chinese female role was entirely based around their responsibility to provide loyalty and service to their husbands and his ancestral line. Indeed, the physical, emotional, and financial burdens of such filial piety has been shown by researchers to fall primarily on female daughter-in-laws (or wives of sons), and daughters, who are often the ones responsible for carrying out services for the elderly and maintaining important family relationships (Sung, 1991). Thus, in Asian society, care giving is 'embedded' in women's moral beings and identities (George, 1998).

Such emphasis on filial piety and caregiving behaviors as the expected actions for Asian girls like herself had an inevitable effect on Shu Fang's decision to not follow her original plans to pursue a job or internship in psychology in Kuala Lumpur, but to return home after her graduation to "comfort and care for" her ailing mother. Shu Fang herself immediately saw the gendered aspect of her obligation in describing her decision, as she explained to me "now there is no healthy woman in my house, and my father and brothers need me as much as my mother does." Moreover, she discussed such her decision as a distinctly Chinese one, in saying that she wasn't about to just "send money or flowers, like they do in the West." Indeed, Shu Fang's obligation to her mother and her placement of her family's needs before her own reflect her strong adherence to traditional Chinese ideas of filial piety and women's role in fulfilling such obligations. If she did not return home she would be regarded as a bad daughter, and as a negative example of how an 'ideal' Chinese woman should behave.

Thus, Shu Fang's experiences with her mother highlights how gendered roles for the 'ideal' Chinese female create uneven demands among male and female

Chinese migrants. The expectation that a Chinese female strictly adhere to traditional and unmovable cultural roles, made even more important in the Malaysian diasporic context, asks Shu Fang to ignore her own life plans and to place her family's demands above her own. As a result, Shu Fang's economic future has been destabilized. Indeed, as Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson showed in their study of Asian American women, struggles over gendered identity and work trajectories often become intertwined with ethnic identities to create a downward slope in ethnic females overall economic success (Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson, 2003). Shu Fang's decision to return home was not simply a question of whether she would be career-oriented or family-oriented, but rather, whether she would be an 'authentic' Chinese woman, or become diluted by Western values and the demands of a modern and competitive nation-state economy. That Shu Fang's obligations as a Chinese female remain the same even thousands of years since the Confucian code originated, and that in spite of the fact that she now lived outside of China in a modern nation where exposure to Western feminist ideas of equal gender roles in caregiving are prevalent seemed not to matter, or at least did not sway her enough to make her question her filial duties. More importantly, her status as a Chinese person in a Malay state and as a lower-class and rurally-based Chinese Malaysian would seem to be factors that would force a negotiation of her traditional responsibilities as a Chinese female—and yet she held to them—even as they held the potential to cost her gravely.

Shu Fang's decision to hold to her traditional Chinese gender role, whether made by her own agency or social influence, is made even more complex in light of the obvious variety of gendered ideals available to her in contemporary Malaysia, and especially within the cosmopolitan Kuala Lumpur. She must negotiate

the various gendered ideals of Malay culture, those of Western culture, and those of Chinese culture—three ideologies which are at times opposite in their gendered expectations. Indeed, the Western culture is usually presented as representing ideas of gender equality and female independence (even as this remains far from reality within Western nations themselves) in direct opposition to the traditional Chinese gendered ideals. Certainly, since the time of Mahathir modernization project, Malaysia has followed a pattern of ambiguity in borrowing Western ideals. Such ambivalence has played out in the nation's collective opinion on the education and career orientation of Malaysian females.

Patricia Sloane-White, in an article entitled “The Shifting Status of Middle-Class Malay Girlhood: From ‘Sisters’ to ‘Sinners’ in One Generation,” specifically addresses how Malay mothers, and the daughters they raise, have been precariously displayed first as symbols of ‘success’ in Malaysia quest for modernity during the 1970’s and early 1980’s, and subsequently as ‘neglectful’ and career-minded mothers, who were ignoring their roles in the home during the 1990s, as the government became more and more uneasy about the modernization it had so fostered only decades before (2009). It is incontrovertible that in Malaysia, as elsewhere around the world, this ambiguity surrounding women’s place inside and outside of the home remains prevalent today.

It is also important to readdress the Islamization process that Malaysia has been undergoing since the late 1980’s, in which Islamic culture is increasingly identified as the only official Malaysian culture, and to acknowledge therefore that the gendered standards created for Malay women have been applied unwantingly to Chinese and Indian Malaysian women as well. As Malay women have become



increasingly criticized for being too career-minded, so too have Chinese Malaysian women. Indeed, independent and educated Chinese women have actually become key targets in Malay political attacks against their political opponents. A relevant and shocking example of this use of Chinese women against their own ethnic group as a whole can be found in the case of the recent public wrangling of Elizabeth Wong, a widely respected politician for the Chinese opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat in the Malaysian state of Selangor.

Ms. Wong, who had long been an outspoken advocate of ethnic equality and human rights since her university days in Australia, had only entered the Malaysian political arena in the elections of March 2008, becoming the first opposition member to be elected to her seat in parliament in Malaysian history. However, by February of 2009, newspapers reported that nude images of Wong were circulating around the internet--a report which would prove to be the turning point in Elizabeth Wong's political trajectory. Though the photographs were taken by Wong's ex-boyfriend in the 'privacy' of her own home, she was widely criticized by Malay politicians and newspapers, who deemed her "morally unfit" and questioned what an "unmarried woman" was doing naked with a man who was "not her husband." Thus, Elizabeth Wong presents an almost tragic depiction of how 'modernity' and the increasingly strict morals of Islamic Malaysia can combust to create a vulnerable position for Malay and Chinese women alike, who are then utilized as ammunition against the Chinese Malaysian ethnic community as a whole.

While Shu Fang is encouraged to pursue her education and attain economic success in a very 'Western' way, she is vividly warned that her success in the *social* sphere may be in danger if she refuses to follow traditional Chinese and

Malay gender roles of pious wife and mother. She must only look to the example of Elizabeth Wong to see how dangerous the experience of navigating the Malay, Western, and Chinese gendered terrain can be—where women’s private lives are grounds for public interrogation.

#### Gender and Chinese Ethnicity: John

John, too, experiences this ambiguity regarding women’s place in the public and private spheres in modern Malaysia. In discussions about his desires and expectations for his theoretical future wife he would describe a sort of modern superwoman—an educated, Westernized, and beautiful woman who would just happen to place the role of ‘devoted mother’ at the top of her busy daily to-do list, which would nonetheless include a fulltime and well-paid career. In short, Shu Fang, being village-minded and traditional, is not John’s kind of girl. Instead, he would court an English speaking girl, preferably with money of her own to ensure their comfortable positioning within the urban middle class that John has grown up in.

Literature on the place of Malay and Asian womanhood in Malaysian modernity has shown that the competing ideologies that make up this superwoman make her an impossible theory—only existing in imagination of John and his fellow Malaysian men (Sen and Stivens, 1998). Such idealized women are purported to be involved with, and in fact in many cases represent, modern, educated, capitalistic culture in Malaysia, as borrowed from the West. Yet, simultaneously they are expected to remain true to their ‘Asian Values,’ in the home-- which inevitably entails remaining true to the Confucian-style marriage traditions in which the wife serves her husband as part of her filial duties. What makes such a balance even more difficult, as Malia Stivens and Krishna Sen note in their work on middle-class culture and gender

in modern Malaysia, is that such modern intellectual women are often well-schooled in the feminisms of the West, and are therefore often living, creating, and contesting their own gendered position in the Malaysian landscape simultaneously (1998:112). In light of this research, it is not surprising that John too has contradictory notions about gender, and his own role within his future family as he seeks a Westernized working woman by day and a good Asian wife by night.

As impossible a reality as John's idealized Asian wife may be, it is a direct presentation of how gendered ideals interact with his own subjective ethnic identity. John does not see his Chinese'ness' as tied up within his own practice of "traditional" Chinese practices, as shown by his Christian instead of traditional Chinese religious affiliation, his consumer habits that are based more on Western culture than any Chinese networks, and his inability to speak a Chinese dialect. However, it seems that he draws the line in regards to what he considers Chinese in the cultural behaviors of his wife. In short, while his own actions may not affect how he sees himself as a Chinese person, the actions of his wife must be "Chinese" in order for him to feel like a good Chinese husband. This finding is in agreement with literature that has claimed that culture is reproduced and conserved in the home (Stivens, 1994). It seems John believes that without a traditionally Chinese marriage, he isn't Chinese any longer. Moreover, his aspiration to have a traditionally Chinese wife can be seen as an adherence to the Chinese cultural value of filial piety in that he is fulfilling his parents' wishes for him to have an obedient wife who will serve the entire family.

## The Geographical Divide: Urban Versus Rural Ethnic Identities In Shu Fang and John

Now that I have displayed that while Shu Fang and John inhabit the same objective identity as "Chinese Malaysian students at UTAR" they experience very different subjective realities as governed by 'fields of identity' such as religion, class, and gender, it is important to broaden their personal experiences to show how they reflect a geographic division among Malaysian Chinese. After a detailed comparison of religious, classed, and gendered subjectivities of Shu Fang and John, I shall argue that they can be summarized in the broader issue of differential geographical locations in the Malaysian landscape acting to alter Malaysian Chinese understandings of their ethnicity. Lastly, I reveal the ways in which Shu Fang and John are still similar in spite of such ethnic identity differences.

### Urban Rural Divide

Such differential ethnic understandings in relation to Shu Fang and John's class, religions, and genders can be related to the broader geographical divide that was found in my study to influence ethnic understanding of Chinese Malaysian UTAR students. In short, Sarah and John are separated by what is known in literature as the urban-rural divide. As discussed within Chapter Two, this urban-rural divide has been widely documented among the Chinese in the mainland, as well as in other developing nations, and it encompasses the other divisive factors of wealth levels, access to technology and education, language differences, religious affiliation, gendered behavior and how insular or outward-looking a community of people may be. As noted by Eric Thompson in his study of the experiences of Malay male migrants to Kuala Lumpur, this "spatial dimension" represents not just a simple geographic location, but rather, "a whole dichotomous universe of attitudes, characteristics, and

practices mapped out onto a rural-urban divide” (Thompson, 2008:429). Thus, Shu Fang and John represent two very different physical and metaphysical positions within the Malaysian Chinese community, each carrying its own experiences of Chinese‘ness,’ as seen through the differential experiences of gendered, religious, and classed realities associated with them.

Class is one of the main aspects of the urban-rural divide, and John and Shu Fang are divided accordingly. Shu Fang’s geographic location in rural Malaysia has relegated her economic standing in dictating not only the occupations that her parents were able to undertake in their rural communities, but also, by limiting Shu Fang’s own career opportunities in that she learned English and Malay late in her life because of the isolated nature of her Chinese village. Moreover, it is because of economic hardship that Shu Fang shall be forced to put her own aspirations aside as her family struggles with only one working parent. John, however, is experiencing a rise in his already upper-middle class socioeconomic standing, and is not held back by financial woes. Yet, such economic differences, as objective and practical as they may seem, were not seen as such by Shu Fang and John. Instead, they experienced their ethnic identities through the lens afforded to them by their differential geographic and economic positions. Shu Fang and John’s views on how money and class relate to their own ethnicity were shaded by geographical divide. Shu Fang’s belief that hardship and Chinese ethnicity are inexorably intertwined and John’s belief that his Chinese ethnicity and capitalistic identity are completely incompatible are viewpoints shaped by their differential economic positionings, which are imbedded within their geographic placement in the Malaysian landscape.

Education, language, and the level of outward influence that a Chinese Malaysian individual experiences are all intertwined aspects of this broader geographic urban versus rural divide that also influence one's ethnic understandings. The fact that John and Shu Fang had gone to different types of primary schools influenced which languages they speak with most proficiency, which in turn affects their ability to interact with members of other ethnic groups as well as members of their own Chinese community. John's early years of schooling provided him with an excellent command of the English and Malay languages, which in turn allowed him economic opportunity and the ability to understand and interact with people from the West and Malays. Yet, while John's westernized, consumerist, English-speaking lifestyle had the effect of distancing him from many of his fellow Chinese Malaysians. John's inability to speak a Chinese dialect inevitably affected John's ability to participate in traditional Chinese religious ceremonies, thus inevitably affecting his subjective religious experience as a Chinese Christian.

Shu Fang, on the other hand, correlated English and Western lifestyles with Chinese people who were either embarrassed of their ethnic roots or irresponsible in paying homage to them. She often noted her distaste for those Chinese Malaysians who would speak to her in English when she knew quite well that they could speak Mandarin, saying that they did so to "show their superiority" by associating themselves with the language of the West. Thus, Shu Fang's geographical positioning superseded her classed ethnic understandings in that she associated English speaking Chinese who were located in the urban sections of Malaysia as being upper class Chinese. Moreover, Shu Fang was not as exposed as John was to Western lifestyles, and thus was perhaps more influenced by traditional Chinese gender roles than was John. Thus,

their geographic positions led to different educational experiences and lingual abilities which in turn affected Shu Fang and John's individual beliefs about Chinese ethnicity and its interaction with religion and gender, and class.

### Shu Fang and John: Similarities in Ethnic Identities

Shu Fang and John were undeniably different in their understandings of the Chinese ethnicity as it interacted with their different gendered, classed, religious, and geographic viewpoints. Yet, as Chinese people in Malaysia, they maintain some similarities in their ethnic identities. Firstly, because of the institutional nature of ethnic identity in Malaysia, Shu Fang and John are rendered similar in that they both inhabit the same political ethnic identity. While they may represent internal differentiations between Malaysian Chinese, they are united in their polarization against the Malay ethnic group, who is seen as a competitor for political dominance in the nation. Shu Fang and John are also united on their ethnic understandings associated with Chinese gender roles, both associating Chinese ethnic identity with the acting out of traditional Confucian gender roles. In fact, it was this understanding of traditional gendered and familial roles that created another similarity in Shu Fang and John's ethnic understandings—they saw their ethnic culture as distinct and in opposition to Western culture. This distinction was seen as a result of the lack of value placed upon female chastity and traditional family roles in Western culture, in contrast with a Chinese ethnicity that both Shu Fang and John saw as tied in with the familial realm. Finally, Shu Fang and John are both university students at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, which inevitably gives them a shared experiential background which shall shade their knowledge of the world and their own ethnic place within it.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION

Before drawing the threads of my argument together, this section will summarize the stark differences between the two individuals I have focused on in this analysis, specifically in relations to ways in which each one experienced his or her classed, religious, and gendered identities. Then I will proceed to set their experiences within the larger whole of Chinese Malaysian ethnicity.

While Shu Fang fit literature on Chinese capitalist culture in following traditional *guanxi* networking traditions, John did not relate his Chinese ‘ness’ to his class, and instead adopted a global consumer culture. Moreover, while Shu Fang saw independent success as an ethnic trait, John did not seem to think that hardship alone could identify his Chinese ethnicity. John and Shu Fang’s religious identities were different as well, with John adhering to Christianity, a Western religion, and Shu Fang believing that her practice of Chinese religion was distinctly tied to her Chinese ethnic identity. Finally, Shu Fang and John differed in their gendered ethnic identities in that, while both felt ambivalent about traditional Chinese gender roles, Shu Fang’s Chinese identity is tied into her role as a caregiver within the home sphere, while John’s Chinese identity is directly tied into his ability to be a responsible husband and son by succeeding outside of the home in the workforce. Moreover, John had a very different gendered ideal for a good wife than Shu Fang did, as John wanted a Westernized and middle-class female which was not representative of the more rural or working class



Chinese female as enacted by Shu Fang. Given these differences, how does it become possible to refer to them both as their society does, as “Chinese Malaysians”?

The marriage of politics and race throughout Malaysia’s history has made the ethnic categorization of every citizen exceedingly clear. From this definition, both Shu Fang and John are unquestionably Chinese. However, the more pressing issue, and the more difficult one to satisfy, is what it means to be Chinese. To research the ethnic understandings of Chinese Malaysians is a source of complexity, as the Chinese ethnic identity was not determined wholly at the time of British racial segregation in Malaysia, nor has it remained unchanged from ancient times in China. Instead, Chinese identity in Malaysia is a product of time and place, and has changed as Malaysia has emerged as a successful nation-state. Ethnic identity incorporates and is shaped by the modern dilemmas of class, geographic location and dislocation, gender, and religious affiliation, as is represented in this thesis through the stories of Shu Fang and John. I utilized their stories not to display the complete arbitrariness of surface categories such as ethnicity, but instead, to display how such compartmentalization often ignores the depth of perspective that comes from multiple “fields of identity” intersecting at once in a single subject. Indeed, while the ethnic realities of Shu Fang and John disrupt political notions of a monolithic Chinese ethnicity, and hint at the variation that must occur within all Malaysian ethnic groups, their ethnic identities were indeed structured in the sense that they were guided by historical and socially constituted fields of gender, religion, geography, and class.

The results of this study have broad ramifications, both within the Malaysian ethnic context, and within a global context regarding sociological concepts other than ethnicity. Firstly, that such variation was found within the singular Chinese

ethnic category in Malaysia calls for a renegotiation of the entire identity politics in Malaysia, which often assume that variation occurs only between ethnic groups and not within them. Thus, studies of Indian and Malay ethnicity in Malaysia should begin to look at various layers of understanding in subjects that may create diversity within their ethnic understandings. The economic, gendered, religious, and geographic strata that created such difference in ethnic understandings of Chinese Malaysian university students at UTAR can easily create distinctions between Indian Malaysians or Malays as well. Moreover, categories that place all people of the same gendered, classed, or religious identities should be questioned as well, as these categories too are intersected by various layers of understanding that demand much more than a superficial classification. Thus, the question of “What are you?” should be reevaluated in Malaysian politics and in research on ethnicity in general, and instead the focus should be upon the multiple fields of identity which interact to structure each person’s understanding of the world.

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