

ARTICLE

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**EXAMINING THE INTERSECTION  
OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES:  
THE MALAYSIAN CHINESE EXPERIENCE**

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## **EXAMINING THE INTERSECTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES: THE MALAYSIAN CHINESE EXPERIENCE**

### INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to present the intersections that constitute the cultural identity of Malaysian Chinese and suggest how their migration and settlement experiences have shaped their sense of who they are and who they are becoming through personal and family histories. I utilise a methodology analogous to the microhistory framework, where the individual assumes an active role in the process of memory formation and exercises agency in the selection, alteration and transmission of memories. This perspective encourages “understanding people in light of their own experience and their reactions to that experience.”<sup>1</sup>

Most scholarly publications on Malaysian Chinese identity use a macro-level approach, emphasising the study of social and political institutions while giving less attention to personal introspection and micro-level research. A September 17, 2022, *New Straits Times* article quoted Danny Wong, a Malaysian historian from Sabah, as saying that family history, tales and memoirs help people comprehend both their past and their future trajectory. Wong believes that scrutinising one’s personal history through the medium of family narratives can lead to a critical evaluation of the interconnectedness of familial, communal and national dynamics.

My artworks, reproduced in this article, aim to visually portray these submerged and accumulated layers of intersecting identity through a microhistorical perspective. Through my art, I present the intersecting and multi-layered inner reality that has accumulated traces of lived experiences. This inner reality is distinguished by its multicultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual character and multiracial experiences that combine to influence identity formation, under the impact of constantly changing social environments. The evolution of these inner realities is conveyed using visual assemblages combining printmaking, photography and digital manipulation in order to visually represent the socio-cultural formation of a Malaysian Chinese individual. The artworks reproduced convey the mutable nature of ethnic identity in conjunction with variables such as geographic location, degree of interaction, era, and age group.

Focusing on the Malaysian Chinese experience, I challenge the idea of a fixed and singular national identity, highlighting the complexity and diversity of the migration experience in a multicultural society with blurred boundaries around ethnic classification.

## THE *BANGSA MALAYSIA*

Even given the relatively stable nature of Malaysian politics, nation-building has always been a central concern. Despite being a fundamental, ongoing national agenda, Malaysia's nation-building project remains unresolved. The introduction of the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race) by former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad in 1991 was intended to resolve the "unfinished business" surrounding the nation-building initiative. Nonetheless, as the ideology of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) functions as the basis for official historiography in Malaysia, the nation is dominated by a Malay-centric ideology which positions it as a Malay-dominated plural society. In the absence of a unified Malaysian culture, many Chinese equate *Bangsa Malaysia* with *Bangsa Malay*. As a significant minority, Malaysian Chinese have favoured the multiculturalist *Bangsa Malaysia* concept. However, the term *bangsa* (race) is used in a Malay nationalist context to refer to the Malay race or nation (*Bangsa Melayu*).

Malaysia's official ethnic classifications of 'Malay,' 'Chinese,' 'Indian' and 'Others' reflect the country's diversity, while celebrating a multicultural and plural society. However, these categories, based on ethnic and cultural differences, often serve as a crucial identity marker in the lived experiences of Malaysian Chinese. When Hannah Yeoh, a prominent politician in Malaysia, and her Malaysian Indian husband tried to register their children's ethnicity as Malaysian, their request was refused, leading to a reassignment of their children's ethnic classifications. Consequently, their eldest child is officially recognised as Chinese, while the youngest is identified as Indian.

In Malaysia, the Chinese collective past and cultural identity have been systemically marginalised in official historical records, which emphasise two main constitutionally recognised categories: *Bumiputera* (literally "Land of the Prince(s)") and non-*Bumiputera*. The national history curriculum is obliged to align with government nation-building agendas. Despite the cultural diversity visible in Malaysia's historical record, the national narrative depicted in history curricula and official museum displays largely reflects the political commitment of Malay elites to maintain Bumiputera-centric policies. Historian Helen Ting notes that since the racial riots of 1969, Malay political primacy has been asserted in school history textbooks.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the compulsory requirement for a pass in Malay language, known as Bahasa Malaysia – which serves as the country's national and official language as well as the mother tongue of the predominant Malay ethnic group – history was made a mandatory pass subject for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) in 2013.

As a result of these measures, the state has become the arbiter of history by prescribing the curriculum and "simultaneously legitimising the textbook's version of history."<sup>3</sup> In contrast to many nations with a postcolonial legacy that celebrates an uncontested common history, Malaysians are an active embodiment of competing memories. History curricula frequently perpetuate hegemonic national narratives and marginalise alternative or minority histories by (for example) diminishing the contribution of Malaysian Chinese during the Japanese occupation and subsequent nation-building efforts. This marginalisation is exacerbated by the propagation of a "Malay-versus-non-Malay" perspective and the use of terms such as *pendatang asing* (immigrants) to refer to Chinese and Indian minorities, perpetuating the notion that these groups are "other."

Throughout the history of nation-building in Malaysia and in projecting an anticipated future, the government has invested substantial energy in promoting a unitary Malaysian national identity. In these efforts, the 'assimilation' and 'integration' approaches have been applied simultaneously. These two sociological concepts have both been associated with the terms 'alteration' and 'transgression' to describe the psychological responses of an individual or group to a different physical and cultural environment. However, closer examination reveals that they do so to varying degrees and in different ways, ranging between totality (uniformity, homogeneity) and difference (intersection, heterogeneity). They represent fundamentally dissimilar images and conceptions of a nation, expressing distinct strategies and visions. The achievement of cultural unity within a multicultural society should not be identified with uniformity; the coherence of a multicultural identity – *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian) – is not a given, but a process of becoming that is continually evolving. It assumes a constant process of change in developing a new fusion culture, a process of overlapping and intersection, a fusion of different ethnicities that has contributed to shaping this diverse society, a unique nation.

## TRACING THE SUBMERGED PAST

Although, as Ien Ang says, "every ethnic identity has a history and often the label is derived from a people's place of origin,"<sup>4</sup> if we care to spend a second thought on the notion of ethnic boundaries and even the meaning of ethnicity, most cases prove to be more complex and ambiguous in the context of the migration experience. Anthropologists have also debated the relevance of migration to culture and ethnic identification. Throughout their migration history, the heterogeneous characteristics of Chinese have been flattened out and sorted into standard classifications, often through the racial categories in the national census, which are determined by the official logic of racial and cultural differences. However, as Ang observes, "the very name with which the 'ethnic' is referred to – Chinese (or Indian) – already transposes her or him to ... another site of symbolic belonging, a site which is not 'here.'" She also comments that her experience of being Chinese is "inscribed ... on the very surface of my body." Ang's personal experience of being Chinese illustrates how identity is not just shaped by external factors such as culture, society and mental constructs, but is also perceived as physically embodied. This embodiment makes it difficult to escape the expectations and stereotypes that come with being part of a particular group.

Tracing the position of the Chinese in Malaysia today involves an accumulation of the migration history of Malaysia, which is complex and dynamic, with waves of immigrants arriving from different parts of the world throughout its history. The country is characterised by its experiences of human migration, both past and present, with its complex cross-cultural experiences and history of culture overlapping through physical relocation, settling down and participating in nation-building.

The earliest Chinese settlement in Malaya can be traced back to the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century. Wang<sup>5</sup> noted that the Chinese communities had developed with successive "layers" of migration through the centuries. Records of the first generation of overseas Chinese merchants (Hua-Shang) can be traced back to 1349. More than 600 years ago, a Chinese–Malay dictionary was being used as early as 1403. The Chinese had established themselves in Malacca by the early eighteenth century. These early migrants intermarried with locals and developed a localised hybrid subculture, a unique fusion culture referred to as *Peranakan Baba Nyonya*. The settlers adopted the indigenous lifestyle, language and customs, and even acquired the local

language, Malay, as their mother tongue. However, in their customs and religious practices they maintained features of their ethnic identity as Chinese.

The second wave of migrants (Hua Gong) were mostly impoverished and frequently illiterate labourers with ties to their originating dialect groups and clan associations. The division by surname and major dialect groupings reflected their origins in various regions of China, the latter including Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainanese, Guangfu, Foochow and Guangxi. This feature distinguished various occupations based on the particular state and time of settlement.

These migrants set sail for Southeast Asia with the intention of returning to China, despite the hardships of the journey. Traditional Chinese culture valued respect, filial piety and lineage, producing strong sentimental attachments to the motherland. According to the Chinese tradition of 落葉歸根 (fallen leaves shall return to their roots), those who left China were expected to stay connected with their ancestral home and be buried where their ancestors were buried. However, the vast majority of these early migrants did not return to their ancestral lands and were interred on the land where they had lived and laboured. In numerous Chinese cemeteries throughout Malaysia the earliest migrants were laid to rest. Today, Malaysia's Chinese communities are predominantly composed of third- and fourth-generation descendants of early immigrants who were born in the host country rather than in China. Today, only a minority retain fragmentary recollections of their ancestral homeland.

From Chinese merchants (Hua-Shang) to labourers (Hua Gong) to Malaysian Chinese, the history of migration has progressed through various stages. This identity transformation reflects the localisation and adaptation processes through multiple overlappings of historical, cultural, national, communal, religious and educational dimensions. Cross-cultural experiences and evolving identities within a localised context have made Malaysian Chinese a heterogeneous group, with a localised fusion of identities regarding practices, beliefs, languages and ways of life.

Malaysian researcher Lee Kam Hing has pointed to the transformation of Chinese identity consciousness during the pre-war period. Because Chinese in Malaya considered China their ancestral homeland, this fostered a particular brand of nationalism, known as *huaqiao* (people of Chinese ethnicity) nationalism. This loyalty was temporary in character, as loyalties had the potential to shift between China and their new homeland. However, following significant political changes in both China and Malaya, early Malayan-Chinese leaders believed that building loyalty to Malaya was essential to obtaining citizenship and a respectable political role in the newly independent country.<sup>6</sup> Political participation and the formation of party allegiances indicate an awareness of a Malayan-Chinese identity during the pre-war period.

## PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

As Malaysian Chinese transitioned from a diaspora and an identity as migrants from Mainland China to citizens who were rooted in the country where they lived, they encountered difficulties in adapting to their newly assumed cultural identity in Malaysia's socio-political landscape, where the Malay-dominated plural society created tensions and imposed challenges on the Chinese communities.

As it became involved in the project of nation-building prior to independence, the bedrock interests of the Chinese community included the right to full citizenship, including the opportunity for economic advancement, preservation of the Chinese language and Chinese schools, and outlets for public expression.<sup>7</sup> However, over time the Chinese community's position has weakened due to a decrease in the Chinese population relative to Malays – from 37% in 1957 to 23.2% in 2010 – leading to a decline in political power and influence. This has made it more challenging for them to advocate for their interests and secure their rights.

Chinese-language education in Malaysia has evolved significantly since the nineteenth century, with Chinese educationists playing a crucial role in its development. However, the inequable treatment given to Chinese primary schools and the requirement for Chinese secondary schools to adhere to the country's monolingual language policy have led to a struggle for recognition and support.<sup>8</sup> These difficulties were exacerbated by the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-75), which expanded education policy beyond compulsory education, establishing quotas to boost Malay enrolment and limit minority enrolment in higher education in the public sphere.

The earliest Chinese immigrants were labourers who worked in tin mining and rubber planting, among other sectors. They contributed to the growth of manufactured exports and small to medium-sized businesses. Adopted in 1971, the government's New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced affirmative action programs to improve the socioeconomic standing of the Malay community. However, many Chinese and Indians living in destitution were neglected. Chinese businesses adapted to an extended affirmative action policy by engaging with the emergent Bumiputera entrepreneurial class, competing with large government-linked corporations and expanding state-sponsored investment institutions.<sup>9</sup>

## MULTIFACETED IDENTITIES

Drawing on his many years of research in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, cultural anthropologist Chee-Beng Tan<sup>10</sup> has described the variations in continuity and change in the acculturation and localisation processes undergone by the Chinese diaspora. He concluded that the localisation process has contributed to the diversity of Chinese identities across the region. This process has also given rise to diverse perceptions of local identities and different models of Chinese culture. For him, "Malaysian Chinese identities have multiple levels and are multifaceted." Regarding ethnic Malaysian Chinese today, Tan has argued that although "some are more acculturated than others ... there are no pure Chinese, whether biologically or culturally."

Tan stressed that, in contrast to Chinese living in other countries, Malaysian Chinese are culturally and attitudinally distinct in many ways. Tan's research, along with that of others in the field, has revealed the heterogeneity found within Malaysia's ethnic communities and the porous boundaries between them. In Malaysian Chinese communities, a variety of collective identities can be found, each with distinct characteristics and influences. These identities frequently overlap, resulting in complex intersections of ethnic and cultural identities which are influenced by variables including familial history, educational background, linguistic preferences, religious affiliation, regional character and cross-cultural experiences. These diverse factors have produced a complex tapestry of diversity within the Chinese-Malaysian community.

In the journey to a new country, settlement and integration as Malaysian Chinese has been shaped by cross-cultural experiences, altered and layered by migration experiences within a plural society that continues to be shaped by an “everyday-defined” social reality.<sup>11</sup> Shamsul holds that identity is constructed “either in a ‘static’ manner, meaning identity is perceived as something ‘given,’ ‘ready-made,’ hence ‘taken-for-granted,’ or in a ‘dynamic’ manner, meaning ‘identity’ is viewed as an ever-changing phenomenon that is being redefined, reconstructed, reconstituted and altered.”

Based on this foundation, Shamsul presented the Malaysian experience as a case study of his “two social realities” approach to the study of identity, comparing and contrasting “authority-defined” and “everyday-defined” social reality. According to Shamsul, in Malaysia “the never-ending story of identity formation and contestation seems to have become a permanent feature of society.” He emphasises that an individual’s identity is not fixed and immutable, but evolves as they navigate their unique experiences. The process of self-definition ultimately entails a constant negotiation between internal and external factors.

## INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

In the cross-cultural migration experience, physical relocation involves a new definition of who we are in the environment. Through the insertion of new learned experiences, the various dimensions of one’s identity intersect. Although the nexus of these dimensions will reflect different priorities for each layer, they are still interwoven and interdependent at the point of convergence. This internal process of self-identification enables the individual to establish a sense of placement and belonging within the larger society. In this context, identity is a dynamic and evolving process, always in progress and incomplete, a matter of “being” as well as “becoming;”<sup>12</sup> it belongs to the past as much as to the future.<sup>13</sup> Immigrant identity, in particular, exhibits a type of heterogeneous “multiple rootedness:” manifold, multiple and never singular.<sup>14</sup>

Reflecting on Shamsul’s “two social realities” in the Malaysian context, in what follows I extend the discussion in order to gain further insight into the various dimensions of belonging in identity formation, and to advance the analytical approach used by Nira Yuval-Davis in her two models of “belonging.” She insists on distinguishing between two analytical levels in the politics of belonging: the first pertains to social locations and the second to people’s identifications and emotional attachments to various collectives and groupings. “These different levels are interrelated but cannot be reduced to each other, as so many political projects of belonging tend to do.” She further analyses the differences between these two dimensions and explains political belonging as “compris[ing] specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging to particular collectivity/ies which are themselves being constructed in these projects in very specific ways and within very specific boundaries.”<sup>15</sup>

Another area where Yuval-Davis takes a divergent view of “belonging” is the emotional attachment to a place, “about feeling ‘at home’ and, as Michael Ignatieff points out, about ‘feeling safe.’” This feeling of belonging is partly generated through everyday practices and the experiences of being part of society. Most people long to see themselves reflected in the larger society and to be a legitimate part of society, not just as a by-product of their official rights and obligations as citizens. Indeed, place is defined as more than just a portion of geographical space, but as something which includes “the sentiments of attachment and detachment that human beings experience, express, and contest in relation to specific spaces.”<sup>16</sup>

Yuval-Davis also acknowledged the human desire to form attachments through emotional investments, where individuals and groups are captured by the desire to belong and to become, a process fuelled by yearning rather than any notion of identity as a stable state. Identity is always in transition through the combination of “processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong. This duality is often reflected in narratives of identity.”<sup>17</sup>

“Home” is the first bounded society to which an individual or a group constructs a strong emotional relationship through personal experiences, and with stories and history constructed both on a personal level and also collectively. People tell themselves and others about who they are and also who they are not. These individual stories “often relate, directly or indirectly, to self and / or others’ perceptions of what being a member in such a grouping or collectivity (ethnic, racial, national, cultural, religious) might mean.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the true meaning of citizenship is belonging at an emotional level and it is constructed through attachment to the homely feeling of a place. Quoting Ghassan Hage,<sup>19</sup> Yuval-Davis<sup>20</sup> describes this fluid “home-making” process as an “ongoing project entailing a sense of hope for the future,” which chimes in with Otto Bauer’s notion (as cited in Yuval-Davis<sup>21</sup>) of “common destiny.” “It is oriented towards the future, rather than just the past, and can explain the subjective sense of commitment of people to collectivities and nations, such as in settler societies or in postcolonial states, in which there is no shared myth of common origin.”<sup>22</sup> In this dynamic process of “being” and “becoming,” identity belongs to the past as much as to the future.<sup>23</sup> Yuval-Davis concludes by relating identity to the interplay of “volition, choice, and intentionality, in several different, if related ways,” which play a central role in belonging.<sup>24</sup>

There are two common approaches to explaining identity. Essentialists attribute an individual’s uniqueness to biology and trace their ancestry through similar physical characteristics linked to a fixed and unchanging mechanism. They perceive identity as an innate, unified concept like nationality, race, ethnicity, religion and gender. Social essentialists view the relationship between ethnicity and identity as fixed, stable, monolithic and exclusive. Social constructionists, on the other hand, acknowledge the fluidity of ethnicity in the cultural dimension, where identity is primarily formed by individual actions.<sup>25</sup> For social constructionists, identities are fluid and can be reconstructed in response to new social and cultural circumstances; linguistically speaking, both the past and present continuous tenses are utilised. In this reading, individuals are not passive recipients of ideas and behaviours transmitted from the past but, rather, culture can and will change over time. People make decisions to adjust and adapt to what is significant and relevant to them. In the context of migration, the process of physically relocating entails a new definition of who we are in the environment, while the experience of daily living will develop from our newly acquired knowledge, defining our identity over time.

Having redefined ourselves in terms of our new environment, our here-and-now lived experiences will overlap with our previous experiences to define one’s identity over time. As a result of this crisscrossing of borders and overlapping of boundaries, the intersections of the various dimensions of identity are activated, and our newly learned experiences will be inserted and merged with the fixed and stable ones. In developing an intercultural and cross-cultural lifestyle, various elements have become intertwined with a person’s collective memory and history. This includes the influences deriving from other elements of the environment, as well as localised encounters with people of various cultures and religions.

This analysis echoes the theories of intersectionality proposed by Yuval-Davis in her article “Power, Intersectionality and the Politics of Belonging.” In her effort to bridge existing scholarship on intersectionality, on the one hand, and theories of belonging and citizenship, on the other, she challenges the essentialism of identity politics and outlines the intersectional nature of belonging. According to Yuval-Davis, belonging is multiple, multi-layered and dynamic: “people can ‘belong’ in many different ways and to many different objects of attachment in a stable, contested, or transient way.”<sup>26</sup> She also investigates the concept of belonging as a means of enhancing and clarifying contemporary discussions about citizenship and develops the concept of “multi-layered citizenship.” “Belonging is multiplex and multi-layered, continuous and shifting, dynamic and attached.”<sup>27</sup> Her theories run contrary to essentialist notions of ethnicity and identity as fixed, stable, monolithic and exclusive. This blurring of boundaries through the overlapping and intersection of experiences and social realities is essentially an internal process that allows the individual to establish a sense of placement and belonging in their larger society.

Although the nexus in each individual’s dimensions will still reflect the importance or priority of layering with “volition, choice, and intentionality,” as Vertovec<sup>28</sup> has argued, “[b]elonging, loyalty, and sense of attachment are not components of a zero-sum game based on a single place,” in which individuals must choose between various identity markers. It is possible to develop multiple facets of identity without contradiction, and these distinct dimensions will still cohere in a single individual.

Just as the concept of belonging is multi-faceted and fluid, similarly, a group may be defined at different times in terms of culture, place of origin or religion. There is no inescapable need to choose between these dimensions, as each can constitute a facet of what defines us as individuals. In identity categories, there are no consistent, unifying boundaries. We see the possibility of constructing unity through multiple and complementary identities, in which each person can identify with the various strata that form identities through the intersection of different dimensions, particularly in a culturally diverse state. However, given these multiple variables at our disposal, we also make decisions to alter and modify what is pertinent and meaningful to us.

## BEING AND BECOMING

Focusing on the multi-racial influence on the formation of my personal identity, I am attempting to visually present these submerged and accumulated layers of my intersected identity through a series of artworks. I seek to explore this complex interior landscape through mixed media, including printmaking, photography and digital manipulation. These artworks attempt to visually manifest the intersecting inner realities of my experience of being Malaysian Chinese through visual assemblages. The artworks reproduced here imply the fluidity of ethnic identity, which is influenced by multiple factors including location, level of interaction, era and age group. Along with the text, they aim to challenge the notion of a fixed and singular national identity by highlighting the complexity and diversity of the migration experience in a multicultural society, with ethnic differences and classifications blurred in the context of the Malaysian Chinese experience.

In *Imprints of Memories* (Figure 1), I took my 80-year-old father as my subject of study: his experiences as a second-generation migrant leaving China when he was a toddler; 75 years of settlement in Malaysia; going through the Second World War period not long after he reached

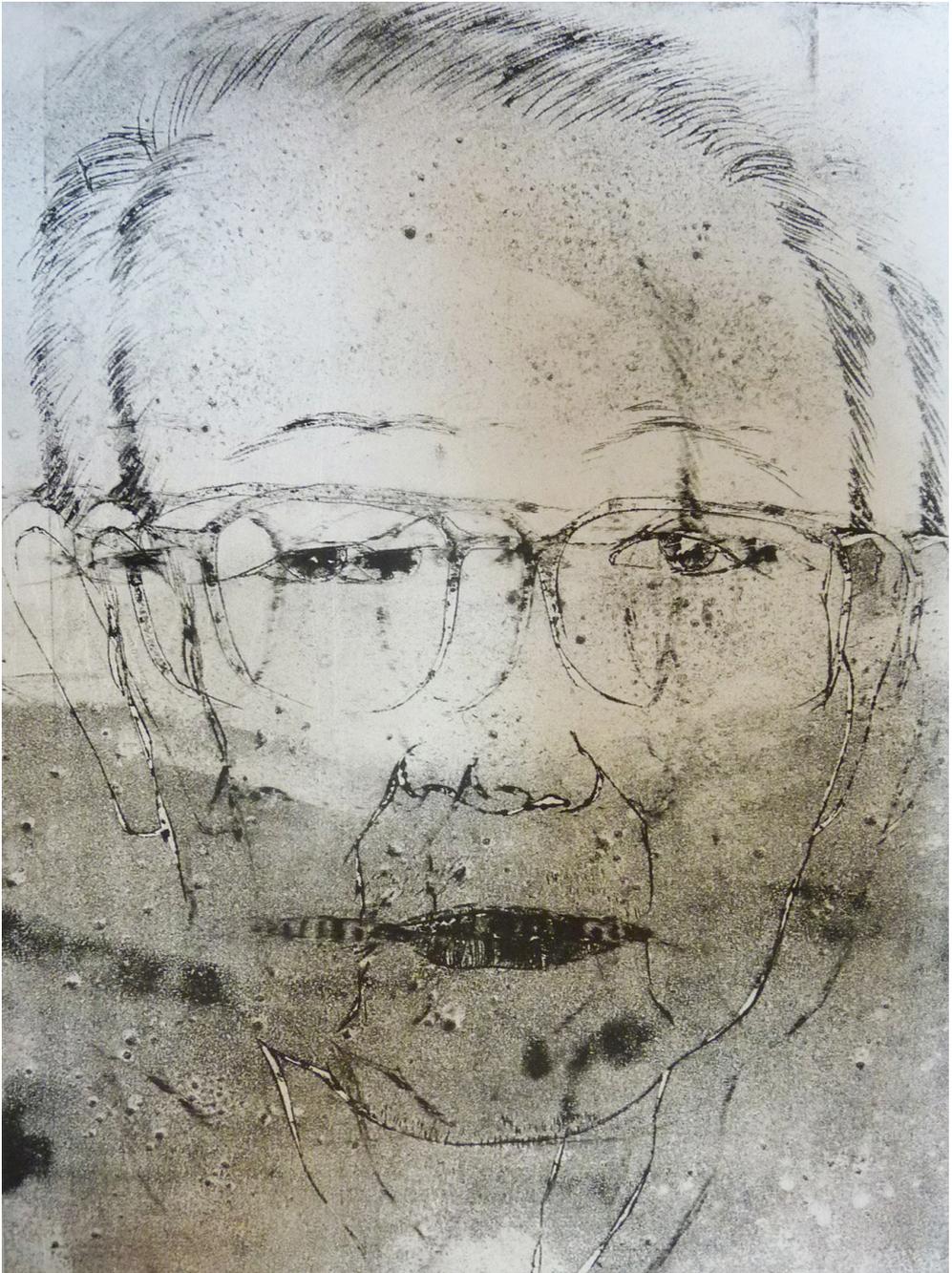


Figure 1. Helen Guek Yee Mei, *Imprints of Memories*, 2010, Mixed medium on paper, 86x 60 cm.

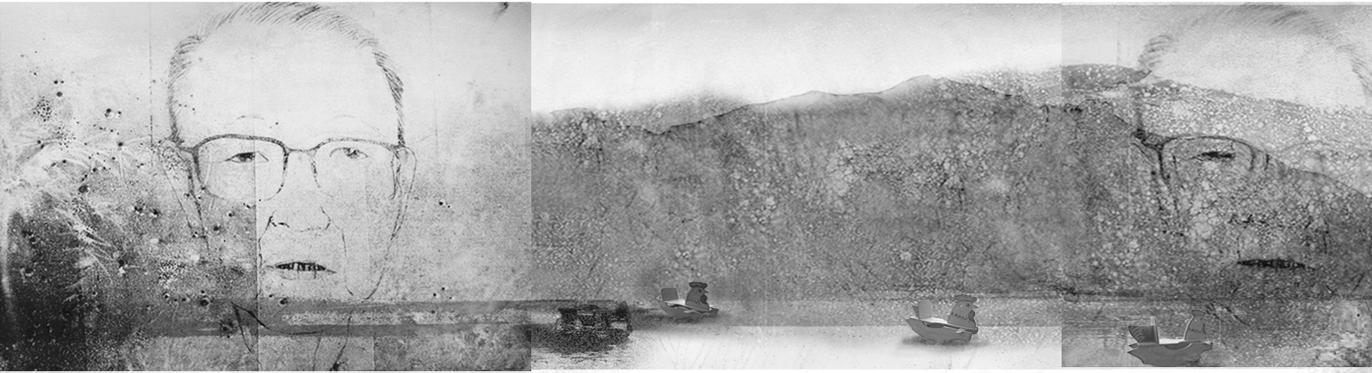


Figure 2. Helen Guek Yee Mei, *History of the Explorer*, 2010, Mixed medium on paper, 42x 286 cm.

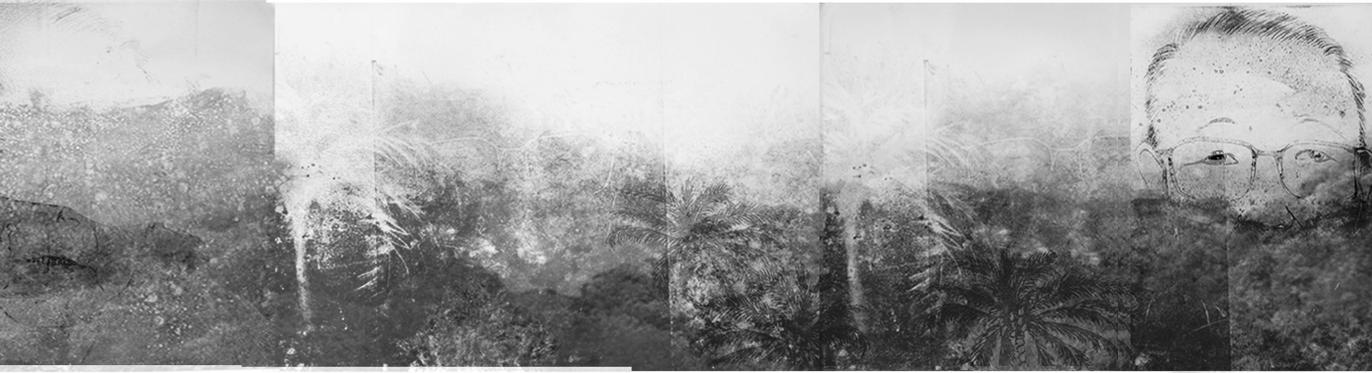
Malaysia; and, together with many Malaysians, witnessing the moment of liberation from the colonial powers. He grew up listening to stories told by relatives and grandparents and was fascinated by the stories he found in Chinese classic literature. He scarcely remembers his earlier home in China. When he finally returned to China in 1998, he expressed disappointment in his experiences of the place and how people interacted.

My father's experience demonstrates that memories submerge and attenuate over time and space, including new lived experiences generated through engagement with the environment and everyday practises, which overlap and intersect, creating new meanings as well as a sense of identity over time, both at an individual and collective level. Iain Chambers has described an encounter involving conversations between one's present self and the resonating culture and memories of the past, meeting in new geographical contexts: "Our sense of belonging, our language, and the myths we carry in us remain, but no longer as 'origins' or signs of 'authenticity' able to guarantee the meaning of our lives. They now exist as vestiges, voices, memories, and murmurings that are interwoven with other histories, incidents, and encounters."<sup>29</sup>

In *Imprints of Memories*, I attempted to express the ambiguity inherent in attachment and detachment from places, with its lingering traces of memories, by revealing the internal movements of the individual, with the historical aspects of migration stories as background. This creates depth in the portrait through the literal imprint of memories.

*History of the Explorer* continued *Imprints of Memories* in exploring migration and settlement. I attempt to present the migrant experience, which makes a break in the linear story of family and ancestry, introducing novel living and social contexts in a new environment and enabling the viewer to experience the fragmented connections and discontinuous gaps in the past. Breaking from the past and taking root in a new land by adopting unfamiliar values and customs is a journey during which one accumulates new life experiences and memories in a new context of the here and now.

Through the arrangement of an extended visual narrative, with seven panels arranged horizontally, a landscape is carved out, symbolising the journey of overseas Chinese in search of a better life. This arrangement of a long visual narrative also suggests an epic journey of resettlement. The



background image depicts the experiences of early Chinese migrants in general, with one side focusing on their origins in China and the other on the new land. The image of the rooster and the superimposed portraits of my father present a specific story within this general narrative, forming the only link between him and his native land. The right side of the image depicts a tropical setting with coconut trees and rainforest. When I queried my father about his recollections of the country where he was born and reared until the age of five before emigrating with my grandparents, he could barely recall anything, including the town and the house where he had lived. The only distinct recollection he had of China, a country he had barely visited, was a rooster rocker that he insisted on bringing with him to Malaya 75 years ago.

I used my father's experiences to inscribe a concise history of the lengthy settlement process undergone by Malaysian Chinese and to illustrate the fluidity of identity created by choice and mobility within the context of migration. Migration is not a static event, but rather a journey to call a place home, a journey which is measured not only by physical distance, but also by affection and a sense of belonging through adaptation, adjustment and self-positioning that requires an equally long journey of self-identification. It is an internal process that enables the individual to establish a sense of placement and belonging within the larger context of their here-and-now lived experiences.

My third piece is a digital printout on canvas (Figure 3). Seen from a distance, it appears to be the silhouette of a person without any indication of skin colour, race, cultural or national affiliation. However, closer inspection reveals fragments of unidentified landscapes that are discernible within the overlapping layers of a silhouette placed against a background made up of densely textured layers that are part of a Chinese ink painting that my father brought back from his first visit to China during his adulthood. The landscape features a Chinese adage that he cherished in his youth. The right side of the artwork features a pattern of local Malaysian floor tiles. In the central section, the image of a pre-war building emerges. It resembles my father's first permanent home in the new land, beside the town's port. As elsewhere in Malaya, many early Chinese merchants settled in the port and contributed to the establishment of the town through the small and medium-sized businesses they started. Almost the entire street was occupied by Chinese businesses, including banks, coffee stores, hotels and transportation services.



Figure 3. Helen Guek Yee Mei, *Layered Inner Landscape*, 2010, Digital print on canvas, 151x 121 cm.

*Layered Inner Landscape* was created based on faded and fragmented memories of home set in an interior landscape. The different layers of imagery have become layered and sandwiched together without indicators of time or separation between eras, but joined together by memories.

*The Traces of Descent* (Figure 4) was created to explore feminist perspectives that would help interpret the migration experiences of Chinese women through the intersection of textiles and patterns. I gathered the textile patterns produced by three generations of women in my family. I began with my grandmother's "bound feet" – a common custom among Chinese women that originated during the Song dynasty, used here to symbolise the first Chinese migrant women who followed their husbands to Malaya. I remember her cradling me while seated in her family home, which my grandfather built to symbolise their "settling down" in the new land.

Many early Chinese migrants settled on plantations and estates. With limited financial resources, it took my grandfather many years to establish rubber trees, vegetables and fruit trees in jungle clearings. Amid these hardships, my grandmother had a miscarriage and she also lost her brother during the Japanese invasion of Malaya. During the Japanese occupation, the Chinese were subjected to the harshest treatment and many families continue to lament the loss of loved ones during this period. My mother told us these stories to remind us of our family's early history in Malaya and to appreciate the blessings and peaceful life that the present generation is experiencing.

I presented my grandmother with a pair of very dark blue pants with a pattern similar to one I had discovered. Most of the patterns it bears are traditional Chinese designs, which she sewed using fabric bought from a nearby textile shop. This pattern was so prevalent that I even spotted it on a local tablecloth. I altered the pattern to make it more visible on the canvas and overlaid it as a background to form part of my memories of that era. The backdrop consisted of village scenes with a few villagers, with coconut, rambutan, and durian trees added to lend atmosphere.

Figure 4. Helen Guek Yee Mei, *The Traces of Descent*, 2011, Digital print on paper, 73x 60 cm each.



As the second generation during the pre-Merdeka (independence) era, my mother is featured in the second part of this series. I presented her with a photograph depicting our youthful family in 1970, embracing our family home. I created photo montages using some of the ancient photographs I still possess. Along with the fashions of that era, I included the fabric she wore as the backdrop, but overlaid it with my grandmother's dark blue-patterned pants. Additional contextual layers were overlaid onto the old rural village that surrounded the new village homes built by Chinese.

Using the same concept and visual resources, I created a third piece which depicts two further generations of my family: my sister and her daughter, the new postcolonial generation of Malaysian Chinese, and the future generation, against the backdrop of my family home in the 1990s. The piece incorporated various clothing and pattern designs. This time, however, the newer layer was on the top, with history forming a solid foundation, the whole work layered with a sense of belonging to this place, with much to anticipate as our future homeland.

Both in tonality and colour, this series accentuates the notion of an evolving culture by merging patterns and clothing designs through past and present generations. These layers support the visual narrative by layering traces of descent and combining our family's accumulated experiences through the use of submerged imagery. The patterns and images used were widespread at the times and places in question. The memories shared are identifiable both as individual memories – the sense of belonging evoked through seeing and emotion – and deriving from our shared experiences.

In *Family Tree*, the subjects were my parents and their experiences, arranged in a way that layered memories and stories across three works. The middle piece was the family's first wooden house, a symbol and the first ground to call home. The combination of these pieces showcased the rich layers of experiences through the ordinary family life setting, highlighting the influence of our surroundings on our identity and belonging.



Figure 5. Helen Guek Yee Mei, *Family Tree*, 2011, Digital print on paper, 78x 60cm (left), 87 x 60cm (centre), 78x 60 cm (right).from the exhibition "Being and Belonging."

## CONCLUSION

In this essay I have described my ongoing research interests in identity, particularly the complexities of human existence that lie beneath the surface of the skin. I began with the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* in a Malay-dominated plural society characterised by ethnically distinct identities. I proceeded to point to the disadvantages suffered by the Malaysian Chinese community and its portrayal in official narratives and historical records as a consequence of Malay-centric nationalist ideologies. Policymakers wanting to foster a cohesive national identity and a sense of patriotism among the peoples of Malaysia have a number of different approaches at their disposal. Changes in the historical and political landscape has meant that there is an ongoing contest between the 'assimilation' and 'integration' approaches.

I have traced the historical context of various waves and layers of migration in Malaysian history, aiming to analyse the Chinese community's cross-cultural experiences and the history of cultural overlap through physical relocation, settling down and participation in nation-building. I also briefly discussed the problems and challenges posed by language, education, culture and the economy that have led to division and a sense of alienation in the context of issues relating to official recognition and representation in Malaysia. It is a story of enduring disadvantage in the policymaking process for Malaysian Chinese.

Malaysian Chinese have diverse educational backgrounds – English-educated, Chinese-educated and Malay-educated – as well as variations in dialects and mother tongues peculiar to regions and states. The younger generation of Malaysian Chinese lean toward Mandarin Chinese rather than automatically adopting the family language and dialect. Able to communicate in various languages, code-switching is native to them. This practice is known as *Bahasa Rojak* (language salad)<sup>30</sup> and Malaysian English and Malaysian Mandarin are becoming new languages of identity for youth.

Diverse religious practices also differentiate the heterogeneous Malaysian Chinese. Traditional ancestor worship – a blend of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and the veneration of local guardian spirits – is prevalent among Malaysian Chinese. This syncretic religion also incorporates local legends and halal dishes, forming a new micro-culture that varies according to localities and includes the deities of Malay-Muslim religion and Orang Asli.<sup>31</sup> The adoption of other religions, including Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, is primarily due to conversion through intermarriage and localisation over time. Chinese migrants' culinary knowledge and access to new ingredients led to the modification and invention of famous local dishes, resulting in both similarities to and radical differences from traditional Chinese cuisine.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike earlier generations, contemporary Malaysian Chinese embrace the country's contemporary reality. The "everyday-defined" form of social reality has intersected with their culture and ethnicity, creating a stronger national identity in terms of their self-identification. In a 2006 nationwide poll, 52% of Chinese and 35% of Malay respondents identified as "Malaysians first." In 2011, 55% of Chinese and 26% of Malay respondents identified thus, demonstrating an increasing preference for national identification above ethnicity among Malaysian Chinese.<sup>33</sup>

The varying pace and intensity of the acculturation or localisation process as it has affected Malaysian Chinese has contributed to the diversity of Chinese identities across the nation. This has also resulted in differing conceptions of local identities and models of Chinese culture. I have argued that beyond the superficial aspects of physical appearance, each individual comprises a composite of layers of identities, with specific identities assuming more prominence than others.

Several artworks shown in the “Being and Belonging” section of explore overlapping elements of my Malaysian Chinese identity. They reveal the coexistence of several localized experiences and blurred identity. The visual compositions of the artworks imply the interior dimensions of the concept of “*Bangsa Malaysia*” (Malaysian), which involves the mixing and intersection of several cultures and experiences, leading to the formation of a composite individual.

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