



SHARON A. CARSTENS

HISTORIES, CULTURES, IDENTITIES:
STUDIES IN MALAYSIAN
CHINESE WORLDS

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Studies in Malaysian Chinese Worlds

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The Malay Peninsula.

TO

John and Laura

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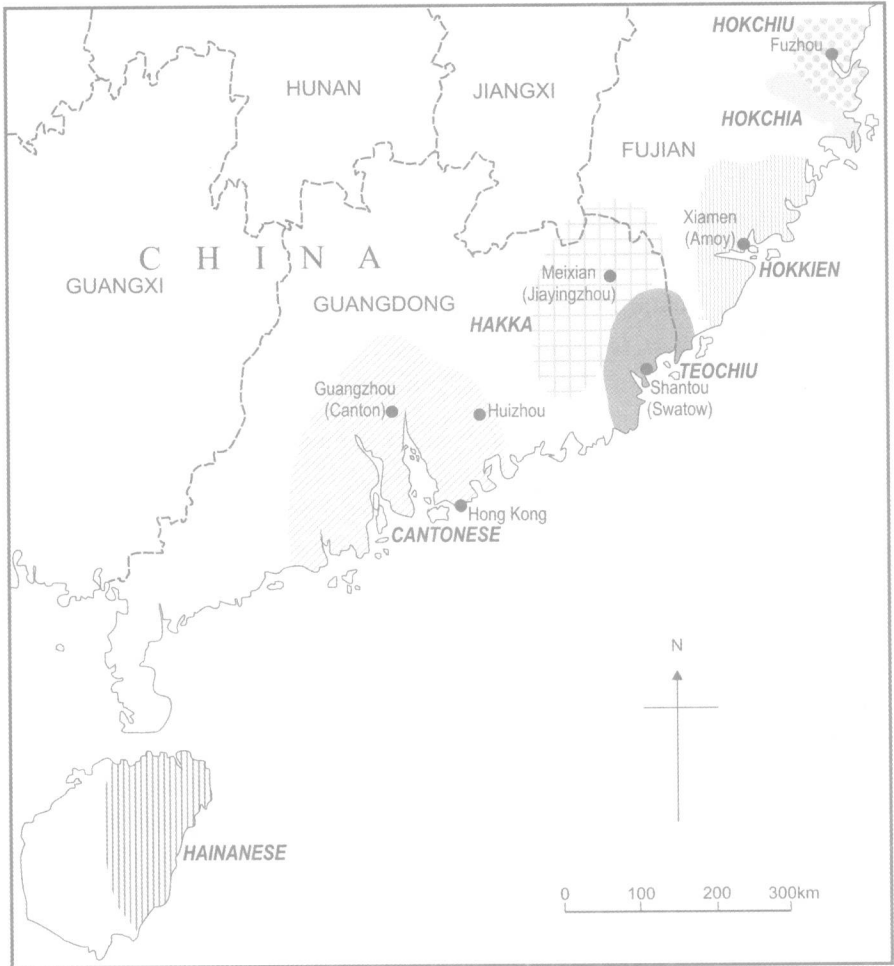
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The Hakka Core Area.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Malaysian Chinese Worlds

The cultural diversity of Malayan Chinese, whose ancestors immigrated from one of the most linguistic and culturally diverse areas of China, was frequently remarked upon by 19th-century colonial observers. Thus, Jonas Daniel Vaughan, writing about Chinese in Penang noted that:

The natives of Quang-tung are more robust and hard working than the Fuh-kien or Chin-chew and other tribes. All the carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and other labourious tradesmen are of the first; a few are goldsmiths, tailors and shopkeepers; they are excellent squatters and may be called pioneers to the Chin-chews ... Fuh-kien or Chin-chew men are tailors, goldsmiths, shopkeepers, merchants and owners of spice plantations, and constitute the most wealthy portion of the native inhabitants (1854: 3).

Although Vaughan's observations focused mainly on dialect group distinctions, the very different experiences of Chinese sojourners to peninsular Malaya derived also from the resources and connections they carried with them overseas, as well as the diverse geographic regions where they settled. Merchants, with money to invest, faced very different prospects than single men who arrived penniless, or even in debt, and who were forced to work as coolies or labourers in interior tin mines. Chinese women, who travelled to Malaya in increasing numbers from the early 20th century, similarly encountered a multiplicity of different experiences. While some were brought over as wives of wealthy merchants or more prosperous tradesmen, others worked as domestic servants or common labourers in construction or tin mining endeavours, or as prostitutes in cities, towns, and mining camps (Lai 1986). With Chinese settlement in Malaysia now spanning five or more generations, these original forms of diversity, based on dialect group, occupation, comparative wealth, gender, and urban/rural residence have expanded to include differences in education as well as variable residence in different geographic regions of peninsular Malaysia with its distinctive ethnic mixes.

This volume grows out of a series of research projects from the past 25 years that have explored some of the multiplicity of long-term Chinese adaptations to living in peninsular Malaysia. Drawing on a combination of historical and ethnographic research, the following chapters cover a range of specific topics and historical periods, but return repeatedly to two key questions. First, how has being Chinese (in diverse ways) shaped responses to the Malaysian environment? And second, how have these variable experiences affected the manner in which Chinese migrants and their descendants have come to identify themselves as Chinese? These two questions are explored from a variety of perspectives ranging from an individual level, that of Yap Ah Loy; to a single Chinese community in rural Kelantan, Pulau; to a specific dialect group, the Hakka; and finally in relation to national and transnational issues.

With the exception of the final chapter, written especially for this volume, most of what is included here has been previously published in a variety of journals and edited volumes. In bringing these essays together, my goals are both to document some of the numerous changes in Malaysian Chinese lives during the last quarter of the 20th century, and to share my own evolving interpretations of these processes. While all of the chapters have undergone minor editing, three chapters have been revised to include additional materials that expand on the original interpretations.¹

The volume opens with two chapters focusing on the 19th-century Kapitan Yap Ah Loy, the now disputed founder of Kuala Lumpur. A close examination of Yap Ah Loy's life reveals a range of different leadership styles for 19th-century Chinese immigrants. Forced to deal with mutually hostile Chinese secret societies and feuding Malay royalty in the context of interior tin mining camps, Yap Ah Loy drew on sources of power that contrasted considerably with those of wealthy merchant leaders in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang, and Malacca. Relying on martial arts skills and personal charisma, Yap Ah Loy utilized a range of culturally relevant strategies in his battles over the control of Kuala Lumpur (and its tin mines) and in the reconstruction of the town and his many businesses. Moreover, as the local context shifted with growing British control of the area, so did the strategies employed by Yap Ah Loy and the Chinese leaders who followed.

The exploits of Yap Ah Loy eventually attracted considerable interest among Chinese from a variety of backgrounds, leading to the publication of more than 40 different Chinese biographies of his life in Chinese publications over an 85-year period. An exploration of these numerous and varied biographies forms the topic of Chapter 3, where close analysis of changes in these accounts over time and place reveals shifting attitudes about the

position of Chinese in Malaysia and the desirable attributes of local Chinese leaders. By identifying with “heroes” of their past, different generations of Chinese have striven to make sense of their own experience and that of their community.

Unlike most Chinese leaders in the Straits Settlements, Yap Ah Loy was Hakka. However, this aspect of his identity has rarely been emphasized in accounts of his life. In fact, the question of dialect group identification has received comparatively little analytical attention in writings about Malaysian Chinese.² Yet dialect divisions were initially one of the main forms of diversity noted by 19th-century observers of Chinese immigrants. Chapters 4 through 7 explore some of the numerous ways in which Hakka origins and identifications have affected (and not affected) various groups of Malaysian Chinese. This section begins with the examination of cultural identities in the rural Chinese community of Pulai, located in southern Kelantan, where modes of identification are conceptualized in terms of a series of nesting categories: Pulai, Hakka, Chinese, and Malaysian. Inspired by Judith Nagata’s seminal treatment of the manipulation of situational identities in Penang (1974), I argue that the relevant identifications for Pulai residents shifted both in relation to the context and to the social actors involved in particular settings. In general, Malaysian and Hakka identities were relatively weak when compared with the sense of being Chinese and attachments to the local Pulai setting. Localized Pulai identities included hybrid practices in domestic settings, where married women might wear Malay/Thai-style sarongs or cook with jungle herbs, while more conservative Chinese values and practices were expressed in male-controlled public settings. These divisions, associated in part with gendered practices, allowed Pulai Chinese to simultaneously express strong local ties while also displaying their continued allegiance to Chinese tradition.

The relative unimportance of Hakka identity expressed by Pulai Chinese stimulated the further examination of Hakka culture and identity in Chapter 5. In fact, when viewed from a broader perspective, Malayan/Malaysian Hakka have exhibited a series of occupational and residence patterns that have distinguished them from other dialect groups. Yet how, given a seeming lack of Hakka consciousness were such patterns reproduced? Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* (1977), I argue that in some situations, cultural patterns may be transmitted from one generation to the next as an ingrained response to the world that lacks any specific label. By separating “Hakka culture” from “Hakka identity” the relevance of the later term remains situationally defined, even where the cultural patterns themselves might continue. Furthermore, in examining Hakka identity patterns from a historical

perspective, evidence shows that responses to the often stigmatized status of Hakka varied from a refusal to acknowledge Hakka roots to a determination to bring honour to the Hakka name.

Returning to the Hakka community of Pulai in Chapter 6, I explore the negotiation of gendered identities and relationships in the context of ritual practices associated with the Guanyin temple festival. As an elaborate annual event spread over nine days, the festival is organized and dominated by groups of Pulai men, who also serve as ritual leaders. However, a special women's group, known as the *funu bui* (妇女会), has for some time organized two special female rituals during this festival. Lacking clear evidence of similar female ritual groups in other Chinese communities, I explore the origins of this group in the context of local Pulai history. Although the Hakka character of Pulai might account in part for the gendered ritual practices of Pulai women, the shifts in the activities of the *funu bui* over time relate more specifically to community responses to various internal and external challenges. This is particularly clear when looking at changes in ritual organization and practices between Pulai temple festivals in 1978, 1984, and 1990. While relatively muted in its ritual expressions, the continued existence of the *funu bui* suggests somewhat different approaches to religious worship among Pulai women and men, and underscores different gendered responses to the continual changes in community life.

Like much of rural Malaysia, the area of Ulu Kelantan that includes Pulai experienced extensive change and development throughout the 1980s and 1990s. For Pulai residents, the building of new roads, the introduction of telephone and mail service, the new availability of transnational Chinese films, and an influx of ethnic Malay residents and Thai migrants punctured the previous isolation and relative social homogeneity of their environment. At the same time, shifts in diplomatic and economic relationships between China and Malaysia reopened previously closed international borders, creating new opportunities for travel and business. In Chapter 7, various aspects of border crossing phenomena are explored in two contexts: that of contemporary Pulai, where transnational connections have, among other things, stimulated a new interest in Hakka identification; and that of earlier Hakka immigrants to Southeast Asia, who dealt with cultural borders in distinctively Hakka ways. In contrast with earlier Hokkien immigrants, whose marriages with local women produced hybrid cultures such as the Peranakan in Indonesia or the Baba of Malacca, Hakka migrants in similar situations integrated local women into communities that remained more clearly Chinese in identity and practice. Such differences once again highlight the multiplicity of ways in which Chinese have adapted to Malaysian settings, and suggests that the

response to new forms of transnational Chinese contacts and cultures will likewise reveal considerable diversity.

Moving beyond the more limited contexts of Pulai and Hakka, the final three chapters focus on Malaysian Chinese cultural transformations and identities at the national and transnational levels. In Malaysia during the 1980s, even as Malaysian Chinese remained very diverse, certain national level policies, particularly those that defined socioeconomic privilege and national or religious cultures in ethnic terms, stimulated broader trends and shared responses among Malaysian Chinese. The return to Chinese primary schools in the 1970s and the national culture debates of the 1980s encouraged Malaysian Chinese to identify with aspects of their Chinese heritage that might otherwise have faded with time. The question of cultural citizenship, or where ethnic Chinese and other non-Malay citizens fit into the government defined version of Malaysian national culture, called into question the often acclaimed success of Malaysia's multicultural state. In Chapter 8, I focus on these national culture debates, placing them first in the context of the constitutional compromises of the 1950s before exploring the multiple factors that contributed to the intensity of the controversy in the 1980s. Rallying around the three key issues of Chinese education, the lion dance, and acknowledgement of Chinese contributions to Malaysian history, Malaysian Chinese from diverse backgrounds often found themselves unexpectedly on common ground. By the 1990s, however, the stridency of the national culture debates had abated, due in part to changes in public policy as well as a softening of the divisiveness of certain ethnic issues.

Among the numerous forces affecting Malaysian Chinese identities of this period were global trends that included the influx of transnational Chinese mass media, particularly television serials and films made in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. The striking popularity of transnational Chinese media among Malaysian Chinese audiences suggested the possible development of an alternative sort of Chinese identity rooted neither in the cultural core of mainland China nor in the specificities of the Malaysian experience, but in a transnational Chinese cultural space that transcended particular geographies. But did Chinese viewers perceive their media experiences in such ways? Chapter 9 draws on ethnographic and survey research among different groups of Malaysian Chinese to examine the variable responses of Chinese viewers to transnational films and television series from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. Although Malaysian Chinese from different age groups, educational backgrounds, and genders often prefer somewhat different genres of television programs or films, the wide-ranging popularity of Hong Kong Cantonese productions is striking, even

among non-Cantonese-speaking Malaysian Chinese, suggesting certain cultural affinities between the experience of being Chinese in Hong Kong and Malaysia.

In the concluding chapter, I examine in greater detail the shifting grounds of Malaysian Chinese identity formations, derived from different levels of discourse and experience at local, national, and international levels. Intermixing descriptive scenarios from a variety of fieldwork situations in 1998 with more theoretical discussions, I argue that Malaysian Chinese identities are always provisional and constantly modified in the different contexts of daily life. The cultural messages from various types of religious and secular organizations, from schools and family, from Chinese and English newspapers, and from other forms of media and consumer culture offer a wide array of potential modes of identification. As individuals and as members of social groups, Malaysian Chinese actively engage in processes of identification wherein identities may be ignored, questioned, resisted, rediscovered, extolled, or altered. Ultimately, what it means to be Malaysian Chinese is multiple, complex, and constantly evolving.

The goal of my research has been to raise a series of questions that will help us better understand how Malaysian Chinese worlds have been constituted and experienced by certain segments of the Malaysian Chinese population. If there is a bias here, it is toward the rural, interior rather than urban, coastal areas of peninsular Malaya, and toward those who have continued to be Chinese educated. While I have tried throughout to understand and represent the perspectives of numerous Chinese friends and acquaintances from different backgrounds, the interpretations presented are ultimately my own, filtered inevitably through my own experiences of Malaysian realities. Like all cultural interpretations, my findings are neither comprehensive nor final, but aspire to represent in some small part, a provisional reading of Chinese cultural transformations in the Malaysian setting.

The research on which this volume is based began with the ethnographic study of the rural Hakka Chinese community of Pulai in 1978. Prior to this I had conducted research on Chinese associations in Singapore; had completed three years of graduate study in anthropology at Cornell University; and had undertaken extensive language training that included an intensive summer course in Malay, followed by 14 months of Hakka and Mandarin language classes in Taiwan.³ Arriving in Malaysia in December 1977, I spent two months in Kuala Lumpur making preparations and awaiting final research approval from the Kelantan State authorities. I had first heard of the Pulai community from the anthropologist Geoffrey Benjamin, who had worked with the neighbouring Temiar, and who directed me to a short article on

Pulai published by S. M. Middlebrook in 1933. Originally founded by Hakka Chinese goldminers in the early 19th century, the Pulai settlement had evolved into a small but stable agricultural community. In the 1950s, during the Malayan Emergency, Pulai families were removed from the area, but by the early 1960s they had begun to return, rebuilding houses and reclearing their fields. While waiting for research clearance in Kuala Lumpur, I learned of the arrests of the Pulai headman and a dozen others in 1976 for allegedly aiding communist guerrillas in nearby jungles. Following these arrests, a 12-hour curfew was put in effect for Pulai and the surrounding area: residents were required to remain in their houses from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., with restrictions enforced by patrols of armed Malay soldiers. Fearing the potential repercussions of unsettled political conditions on my fieldwork, I decided to visit the community to assess how this might constrain my research and if necessary, change sites. However, the warm welcome of individual Pulai families and of community leaders at a feast given for an elderly parent's birthday on the second day of my visit convinced me to go ahead with my plans.

Fieldwork in Pulai extended from February 1978 through January 1979 and involved the usual array of participant observation techniques: living with a family in one of the two Pulai shops; attending religious rituals, birthday celebrations, weddings, funerals, and community meetings; mapping community settlement patterns; investigating land records; conducting extensive household interviews with 81 of the 100 families; and constantly asking questions of as many people as possible. Although my original focus was on questions of cultural identity, the resulting dissertation presented a more comprehensive ethnographic analysis of sociocultural and economic conditions in the Pulai community.

During the 1980s and 1990s I returned to Malaysia five times for periods ranging from a few weeks to seven months. Research on Yap Ah Loy commenced in the summer of 1982, with two months spent in Kuala Lumpur and a short visit back to Pulai. The Yap Ah Loy project continued in 1983 and 1984 with five months in Taipei working mostly on Chinese reading skills and seven months in Malaysia focused on library and archival work in Kuala Lumpur (with visits to Penang and Singapore). Return trips to Pulai included three weeks in the spring of 1984 to research changes in the Guanyin temple festival; two months in 1989 to re-interview Pulai families and study community change; three weeks in 1990 to again view the temple festival; a brief visit in 1996; and three weeks in 1998 during the temple festival period. Research on Chinese mass media brought me back to Malaysia for a total of seven months in 1998, with Ipoh serving as the centre of this project. Throughout

the 1980s and 90s, in between trips to Malaysia, I investigated numerous library resources, both through interlibrary loan and through visits to the Cornell University Echols Collection, Ohio University Southeast Asian Collection, and the Hoover Collection at Stanford University.

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