

Chee Kiong Tong

Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia

Racializing Chineseness



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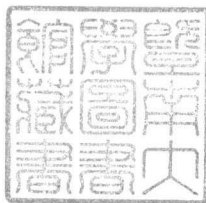
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Contents

1	Racializing Chineseness	1
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Research Problematics	3
1.2.1	Identity, Hybridity, and Multiple Chineseness	3
1.2.2	Ethno-Racialization	11
1.2.3	Cultural Contact, Positions and Ethnic Relations	12
1.2.4	Community, Economic Identity and Racializing Economics	16
1.2.5	Ethnic Policies and the State	18
1.3	Country Surveys	22
1.3.1	Rethinking Assimilation and Chineseness in Thailand	22
1.3.2	One Face, Many Masks: The Chinese in Singapore	22
1.3.3	“Sama Makan tak Sama Makan”: The Chinese in Malaysia	23
1.3.4	Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Chinese in Indonesia	24
1.3.5	Half Chinese or Three Quarters Chinese: The Chinese in Burma	24
1.3.6	A Love-Hate Relationship: The Chinese in Vietnam	25
1.3.7	Hybridization and Chineseness in the Philippines	26
1.4	Research Methodology	26
2	Rethinking Assimilation and Chineseness in Thailand	31
2.1	Introduction	31
2.2	History of the Chinese in Thailand	32
2.2.1	Perception of the Early Chinese Immigrants	32
2.2.2	Rapid Expansion of the Chinese Community in the Nineteenth Century	34
2.2.3	The Character of the Chinese Society	35
2.2.4	The Chinese as the Other	35
2.2.5	Discriminatory Policies Towards the Chinese	37
2.3	Assimilation and the Chinese in Thailand	40
2.4	Bilingualism and Bicultural Education	42

2.5	Socio-Economic Organizations and Occupational Differentiation .	45
2.6	Religion, Tradition and Ethnic Inter-marriage	50
2.7	The Rise of China	53
3	One Face, Many Masks: The Chinese in Singapore	57
3.1	Introduction	57
3.2	History of the Chinese in Singapore	57
3.2.1	Economic Activities	60
3.2.2	Education	61
3.2.3	Community Organization and Structure	62
3.2.4	Segregation and the Use of Space	64
3.2.5	Religious Beliefs and Practices	64
3.2.6	Relationships to Host Country, Homeland and Other Diasporic Communities	65
3.3	Ethnicity in Flux	66
3.3.1	Ethnic Membership by Ascription	68
3.3.2	Religious Bifurcation	71
3.3.3	Language and Education as Contested Terrain	74
3.3.4	Between Generations	78
3.3.5	Community Fragmentation and Disembedding	80
4	Sama Makan tak Sama Makan: The Chinese in Malaysia	83
4.1	Introduction	83
4.2	Chinese Migration to Malaya	83
4.2.1	Economic Involvement of the Chinese	84
4.2.2	Colonial Policy Affecting the Chinese	85
4.2.3	Political Outlook of the Early Chinese Migrants	87
4.2.4	The Japanese Occupation and the Growing Racial Divide	88
4.2.5	The Federation of Malaya and its Implications for the Chinese	89
4.2.6	Sino-Malay Relations During the Communist Insurgency	90
4.2.7	Political Re-Orientation by the Chinese	91
4.2.8	Independence and Racial Riots	92
4.2.9	New Economic Policy and the Move Towards a Malay State	93
4.3	Ethnic Identity of the Chinese	95
4.3.1	Ethnicity by Ascription	96
4.3.2	Religion and Food as Ethnic Markers	98
4.3.3	Language and Education	103
4.3.4	The Economy and <i>Bumiputeraism</i>	105
5	Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Chinese in Indonesia	111
5.1	Introduction	111
5.2	Historical Setting	112
5.2.1	Dutch Colonial Era	113

5.2.2	Manipulation of Racial Politics – The Dutch “Ethical Policy”	114
5.2.3	Rising Chinese Nationalism	115
5.2.4	Managing the Chinese Community	116
5.2.5	Indonesian Nationalism	117
5.2.6	Japanese Occupation	119
5.2.7	Post War Independence Period	119
5.2.8	The Legal Status of the Chinese	120
5.2.9	Political Involvement by the Chinese	121
5.2.10	Sukarno’s Guided Democracy (1958–1965)	122
5.2.11	Chinese Under Suharto “New Order”	124
5.3	Contemporary Indonesia	127
5.3.1	Ethnicity as Discourse: Situating the Chinese in Indonesia	127
5.3.2	Chinese Identity	129
5.3.3	Multiple Chineseness	131
5.3.4	Generational Differences and Their Impact on Chinese Identification	134
5.3.5	Ethnic Discrimination and Prejudice	135
5.3.6	After Suharto	140
5.3.7	Chinese Community	142
6	Half-Chinese or Three-Quarters Chinese: The Chinese in Contemporary Burma	147
6.1	Introduction	147
6.2	The Chinese in Burma: A Historical Overview	148
6.2.1	Growth of the Chinese Community in Burma	148
6.2.2	Economic Position of the Chinese	149
6.2.3	The Chinese Community in the Post War Era	151
6.3	Constructing the Logic of Being Chinese in Burma	155
6.3.1	Economic Identity and Racialization	157
6.4	Long Sleeve and Short Sleeve Chinese: Intra-Ethnic Differentiation	161
6.5	Identity Maintenance, Ethnic Relations and the State	167
7	A Love-Hate Relationship: The Chinese in Vietnam	175
7.1	Introduction	175
7.2	History of the Chinese in Vietnam	175
7.2.1	Early Migration of the Chinese to Vietnam	175
7.2.2	Chinese Pattern of Settlement in Vietnam	176
7.2.3	Impact of the French Colonization on the Ethnic Chinese	176
7.2.4	Pacific War Era	179
7.2.5	Post Independence Period in North Vietnam	179
7.2.6	Nationalism in South Vietnam and its Effects on the Ethnic Chinese	180
7.2.7	Demonstrations by the Ethnic Chinese	181

7.2.8	The Fall of Saigon and its Effect on the Chinese Business Community	182
7.2.9	Deteriorating Relations Between China and Vietnam . . .	184
7.2.10	Chinese Invasion of Vietnam	186
7.2.11	Revival and Control of Ethnic Chinese Private Businesses	187
7.3	Contemporary Vietnam	188
7.3.1	Inter-Ethnic Relations, Differentiation and Discrimination	188
7.3.2	Chinese Identity and Ethnicity	190
7.3.3	Primacy and Politics of Marriage	192
7.3.4	Generational Divide	194
7.3.5	Cultural Similarities and Cultural Differences	195
7.3.6	Occupational Differentiation	197
7.3.7	Community Identification and Associations	198
8	Hybridization and Chineseness in the Philippines	201
8.1	Introduction	201
8.2	Chinese During the Spanish Era	202
8.2.1	Segregation of the Chinese Population	202
8.2.2	Massacres and Expulsion	202
8.2.3	Conversion, Inter-Marriage and the Chinese Mestizo Population	203
8.2.4	The Influx of Chinese Immigrants	203
8.2.5	Anti-Chinese Sentiment and the Development of a Minority Consciousness	204
8.2.6	The American Era	205
8.2.7	Socio-Economic and Political Situation of the Chinese . .	205
8.2.8	The Chinese During the Japanese Occupation	206
8.2.9	Independent Philippines	207
8.2.10	Mass Naturalization of the Chinese	208
8.3	Primordialism and Identity Construction	209
8.3.1	Chinese Language and Identity	211
8.3.2	Chinese Education	214
8.3.3	Chinese Values and Cultural Content	217
8.3.4	Heterogeneous Chineseness	218
8.3.5	Generational Gap and Differentiation	219
8.3.6	Occupational Differentiation and Complementary Relationships	221
8.3.7	Ethnic Stereotypes	222
8.3.8	Religion and Culture	226
8.3.9	Community and Cultural Institutions	228
9	Conclusion: Whither Chineseness	233
9.1	Conclusion	233
9.2	Whither Chineseness: The Rise of China	241
	Bibliography	249
	Index	265

Chapter 1

Racializing Chineseness

1.1 Introduction

At present, it is estimated that there are 18–20 million ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. In the context of the Chinese Diaspora, this constitutes about 80–85% of all Chinese found outside China. As such, any attempt to understand the Chinese Diaspora will benefit from an analysis of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, where the migrant Chinese find themselves co-existing in states with multiple different ethnic groups. The demographic profile and the position of the Chinese in these countries are quite different, providing a fascinating case study of ethnicity and ethnic relations. While Singapore has almost 80% of her population who are Chinese, Indonesia is home to over 300 ethnic groups with several hundred languages, and the Chinese constituting only 3% of the population. The sociological question is whether the different ethnic compositions and the different trajectory of the population result in different conceptions of Chinese identity. One of the main focus on this book, based on primary data collected in the various countries in Southeast Asia, relates to who and what is a Chinese. What are the markers of ethnic identity? How is ethnic identity presented? Are there similarities or differences on how ethnic identity is constructed in these different countries?¹

Southeast Asian host countries exhibit very different stances and strategies in relating to and dealing with ethnic and religious minority groups. For example, Thailand is dominated by the “Tai” people who have allegedly assimilated the Mons, Chan, Lao, and the Chinese into Thai society. One supposedly witnesses a similar scenario in the Philippines. Malaysia and Indonesia, on the other hand, are marked by ethnic conflicts and discrimination against their minorities. This book critically re-examines the major hypotheses regarding ethnic relations in Southeast Asia. What are the ethnic policies of the various countries on the minority Chinese? What are the social consequences of these policies? Using intensive case interviews and fieldwork in various Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam and the Philippines, the book examines the nature and processes of ethnic relations and interactions between the members of the host countries and the Chinese population in these countries.² Using a

comparative analysis, it will explore the causes and consequences of ethnic relations in Southeast Asia. How is the "other" conceptualized?

Given the cultural and ethnic diversities of Southeast Asia, it is not surprising that many ideas, images and concepts have been developed in an effort to understand the ethnic mosaic of Southeast Asia. One of the earliest was the idea of dual society. Boeke (1961), a Dutch scholar and colonial administrator, argued that economic growth and developments in trade and commerce created two separate sectors of society. One sector was impoverished and underdeveloped, centering in traditional rural areas, and the other, westernized, affluent and capital intensive, was located in the urban areas. Countries in Southeast Asia that supposedly exemplify this idea are Malaysia and Indonesia. Boeke's model, however, seemed to have assumed that each sector of the economy is closed, clear cut, and mutually exclusive. Moreover, it failed take into account the interdependence of the rural and urban economies.

Furnivall (1956) suggested an alternative idea, that of plural society. He argued that Southeast Asia, towards the end of colonial rule, had "three social orders, the native, the Chinese and the Europeans, living side by side, but separately. . . save in the material and economic spheres." To Furnivall, plural society "comprises two or more elements of social orders which live side by side, yet mingling in one political unit." Promulgated in 1939, the plural society idea is still widely used today to explain ethnic relations in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as West Indian societies. Like that of Boeke, Furnivall's model is too rigid, with strict compartmentalization of groups along ethnic and racial lines. Moreover, it does not account for relations of power, interracial marriages, or acculturation. There is too much emphasis on the polarization of ethnic groups living in a single society.

The deficiency of Furnivall's model, at least to Skinner (1957a, 1963) is exemplified by the case of Thailand. Skinner argues that a majority of the descendants of Chinese immigrants in each generation merged with Thai society and have become indistinguishable from the indigenous population to the extent that fourth generation Chinese are practically non-existent. He suggests that the similarities of Thai and Chinese cultural inventory have many points in common, and as such, leads to the assimilation of the Chinese into Thai society.³ I suggest that Skinner himself has overemphasized the power of the forces of assimilation. This is evident in the anomalies that were found during the fieldwork with regard to the situation of the Chinese in Thailand today.

Writing in the 1960s, Purcell proposed an ethnic persistence approach. He attempted to evaluate the prospects of assimilation of the overseas Chinese, and noted that the Chinese in Malaya remained very much Chinese in their outlook, speech, religion and cultural traditions. Although they readily accepted a framework of the local government in Malaya, they stubbornly refuse to cease to act and think as Chinese and were very conscious of themselves as a race: "Even now in the world flux of ideas the Chinese of Malaya remain very much as they have always been. About a tenth, maybe are converted to European values; the rest cling resolutely to their language and their religion; they retain their ideographs and their

superstitions; they prefer their own way of eating and drinking; their old style doctor has not been destroyed in competition with his Western educated brother" (Purcell, 1967: 290).

However, concepts such as assimilation, integration, and acculturation do not capture the complexities of ethnic identity and ethnic relations in Southeast Asia. One of the key aims of this book is to, based on the empirical data collected in the various countries in Southeast Asia, develop new conceptual models and to retheorize ideas of ethnic identity and ethnic relations in Southeast Asia.

1.2 Research Problematics

1.2.1 Identity, Hybridity, and Multiple Chineseness

Despite the voluminous literature devoted to the topic, a description of whom, or what, is a Chinese, and what constitutes Chineseness remains elusive. Wang (1999) notes that, "there is nothing absolute about being Chinese." Goodman (1997: 18) described it as a "fragile identity (even) for the ethnic Chinese themselves." Clearly, the terms "Chinese" or "Chineseness" remain problematic categories, embody many dimensions, and require further analysis. Moreover, given the Chinese Diaspora, would the conception of Chineseness be similar across different countries. For example, does a Chinese in Malaysia has the same conception of being Chinese as one who had migrated to and grew up in Thailand? Would a Chinese in Singapore share the same markers of Chineseness as one who lives in a village in China? If they are similar, then it is interesting to try to account for why this is so. If they are different, then, the question is what factors would account for the different conceptions of Chineseness. Is it historical and environmental factors? Is it due to the treatment of the Chinese migrants by the host population? Or is it the impact of the state policies of the host societies?

To understand Chinese ethnicity in Southeast Asia requires a nuanced grasp of the particular context framing the development of Chineseness across history and geography, as well as a critical recognition of the theoretical precedents in conceptualizing the Chinese. Central to such a discussion would be a revisitation of the theoretical debates surrounding the ethnic approaches of primordialism and situationalism, conceptions of assimilation, acculturation, integration and pluralism, and reconsideration of the role of the state in orchestrating the dynamics of ethnic relations in the light of how ethnic groups themselves determine their self identity and establish their boundaries in relations to other groups.

The book aims to recast the theoretical ideas surrounding the issues of ethnic identity of the Chinese based on primary data collected in the various countries of Southeast Asia. One of the key focus is to problematize the label, Chineseness. It will be suggested that Chineseness is a dynamic rather than a static concept, and that the Chinese do not constitute a homogenous group. In the same vein, the indigenous groups are also not homogenous. Labels such as "Thai," "Indonesian," "Burmese,"

"Filipino," are treated as problematic, not given. The discourse of identity and ethnicity, how individuals or groups of individuals, make sense of and negotiate their identities in multi-cultural societies, is the main focus of this book. Analysis will center on the "symbols" and "languages" employed to unite and demarcate groups. Additionally, it examines how self-perception and others' perception are juxtaposed and mediated. In the process, the ambiguities, overlaps, and varieties of ethnic identity will be uncovered.

In the literature on ethnic identity, the distinction between primordial and situational perspectives of ethnicity has been much debated and become highly polarized.⁴ Primordialism, as originally coined by Edward Shils, was most notably developed by Clifford Geertz as a means of accounting for the strength of ethnic ties. According to Shils (1957: 122), "the attachment to another member of one's kinship group is not just a function of interaction. . . it is because a certain ineffable significance is attributed to the tie of blood". Geertz (1963: 259) extended this proposition by arguing that "a primordial attachment is . . . one that stems from the 'givens'. . . [T]hese congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves". Like Geertz, Isaacs (1975: 30–31) believed that an ethnic group is composed of . . . "primordial affinities and attachments" . . . [that] a person . . . acquires at birth . . . [and] it is distinct from all other multiple and secondary identities [that] people acquire. Basic group identity therefore comprises a "ready-made set of endowments and identifications which every individual shares with others from the moment of birth . . . of which the physical characteristics that make up the body and the name are two important diacritical markers." Ultimately, primordialists believe that what matters most is that these ties of blood, language, and religion "are *seen* by actors to be . . . obligatory; that they are *seen* as natural" (Jenkins, 1997: 45; emphases original).

Sociobiologists like van den Berghe (1978, 1995) have extended the primordialist position by arguing that ethnicity is "both primordial and sentimental", hence attention should be paid to the biological markers of race, because ethnic and race relations are "extensions of the idiom of kinship" (1995: 359–368). Ethnicity (and race) is "[the] main genetic mechanism for animal sociality. . . to maximize inclusive fitness" (van den Berghe, 1978: 402).⁵

Thus, primordialism is based on the idea that ethnicity is very much "fixed, fundamental, and rooted in the unchangeable circumstances of birth" (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 48). It stresses the natural and fundamental characteristic of ethnicity to an individual or group and as such it has been viewed as a perspective that resists the potential for dynamism and movement between ethnicities, or even change and innovation within ethnicities. The primordial approach has been criticized for presenting a model of ethnicity that is static and essentialized and lacking in its explanatory powers. Brass (1991: 73) has argued that the primordial position is inadequate because "even when there is a persisting core culture, knowledge of its substance may not be of much use in predicting either the development or the form of ethnic movements on behalf of the cultural groups in question". Vernon Reynolds (1980: 312) argues against a case for the sociobiologist-primordialist perspective

because he believes that van den Berghe's only evidence for primordialism is that it is "based on genetic kin selection, and that it is an extension of that old kinship sentiment which can be simply expressed as 'help your own kin, not outsiders'" which leaves "the theory. . . at this very nebulous level and no further evidence in its favor is offered . . . These statements are [thus] made a priori without supporting evidence".

Contrastingly opposed to the primordial model is that of situationalism (similarly known as circumstantialism or instrumentalism), which stresses instead the flexibility of ethnic ties over time, and views ethnicity as instrumental to an individual or group depending on the circumstance, and as established and maintained through the negotiation of ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1969). Ethnicity, in this case, has to therefore be considered in relation to other competing identities, values and interests, and as such, has to be recognized as socially constructed. This model of ethnicity emphasizes "a degree of plasticity in ethnic identification and in the composition of ethnic groups" (Jenkins, 1997: 44). As the term suggests, one of the central themes of the situational position is that individuals, or actors, are able to "break away" from their ethnic heritages and blend with another culture or even create their own individual or group identities (Bhabha, 1990). Thus, the "variability in the affirmation of ethnic identity may be dependent upon the immediate social situation" (Okamura, 1981: 452), so that an "individual's membership in a particular group in a particular situation is 'determined' by the values, interests, and motives that influence his behavior in that situation" (Gluckman, 1958, cited in Okamura, 1981: 453). Unlike the primordialists, situationalists believe in choice and proactivity in determining one's ethnic identity or ethnic group membership. Situational ethnicity is therefore "motivated[:] it comes into being for a purpose and its continued existence is tied to that purpose" (Banks, 1996: 39).⁶

With the emergence of situationalist approaches to ethnicity, there has been a marked decline in the use of primordial approaches in favor of the situationalist ones, especially upon further refinement of the situationalist perspective as not referring merely to the simplistic notion of individuals or groups choosing their ethnicities, but rather in recognizing that real differences in ethnic groups lie in potential identity markers that are "taken up and mobilized only where it suits the purposes of a particular encounter" (Wallman, 1979). However, there has also been a growing consensus that the sole adoption of either approach is limiting and flawed. The primordialists have been criticized for their static and naturalistic view of ethnicity (Eller and Coughlan, 1993), and the situationalists for defining ethnic interests in primarily material terms and in doing so "underplaying the affective dimensions of ethnicity" (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996: 9). This has led to attempts for a synthesis of the two, and considering how ethnicity may be shown to exhibit *both* primordial and situational attributes (van den Berghe, 1993: 360).

David Brown (1994: xviii) argues that this involves first challenging the antithetical conception of both perspectives, and then moving beyond simply taking a middle position between the two, to developing a distinct perspective. For him, ideology is proposed as a mediating concept which may be seen to feature in both primordial and situational perspectives of ethnicity. In primordialism, the rights

claim of the ethnic community rests upon the ideology employed, while in situationalism, ideology works for the ethnic community, which is conceived as an interest group that mobilizes group solidarity for political action (Brown, 1994: 6). Others such as Ratcliffe (2004: 30) have focused on broader forms of reconciliation, viewing ethnicity as multi-dimensional, layered and stratified, especially in line with contemporary global and transnational movements. Without necessarily reducing itself to post-structuralism, such a view recognizes how levels of primordialism and situationalism coexist, albeit on different planes, in a mutually complementary way. Such advances in reconciling the two allow for a theoretical movement beyond simply casting them as diametrical opposites.⁷

In revisiting this primordialist-situationalist debate, it is proposed that the arguments from both perspectives still remain relevant to studies of ethnicity today. While a theoretical synthesis of the two is demonstrably possible, the important question is in fact the extent to which these syntheses may be empirically helpful (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996: 9). The following chapters on the specific ethnic situation of the Chinese in their various countries demonstrate a strong empirical case for the salience of both perspectives in explaining the way in which ethnic identity is constructed, understood and maintained by the ethnic Chinese. In each case, primordialism remains central as the association with one's Chineseness rests foundationally on generational lineage as well as physical attributes. The book attempts to develop a model of ethnicity that synthesize both approaches in a single framework that incorporates historical processes and local contexts.

A recurrent statement made by informants across Southeast Asia on their ethnic identity is that of one being born a Chinese, and that being a fact that cannot be altered regardless of circumstance. Physical attributes of Chineseness, despite its problematic use, also continues to remain a predominant discourse in one's identification with Chineseness. This suggests that ethnicity is much more resilient than the situationist argue. Although external circumstances, as the various chapters in the book will show, may affect and shape identities, there is evidence that primordial and racial attachments remains very strong and central. Furthermore, this identity "provides an affective dimension to . . . ethnic solidarity. . . As long as ethnicity is *felt*, then, the concept of primordial sentiments is essential to our understanding of this experience" (Scott, 1990: 167; emphasis in original).

At the same time, however, the situationalist perspective proves to be equally useful and accurate in explaining Chinese ethnicity in the region, by casting light on what may be considered the other side of ethnicity that is fluid and flexible. The Indonesian case, for example, shows how ethnicity for some become instrumental, one that is flaunted when beneficial and discarded when it becomes dangerous, threatening or inconvenient to be Chinese. Clearly, both perspectives offer different insights into Chinese ethnicity in the region, and both must be considered together for a fair and complete depiction of what it means to be a Chinese in Southeast Asia.

That Chinese ethnicity is best understood in both primordial and situationalist terms suggest that a homogenous conception of Chineseness is not only self-limiting, but also inaccurate. Instead, the notion of multiple Chineseness captures most realistically the complexity and layered density of the relation

between the Chinese in the region and their ethnic identities. The case of the Chinese in Singapore provides a particularly appropriate example, where the many facets of Chineseness may be most aptly described as its many masks that may be adorned, yet always having one face. In addition, the Chinese residing within the geo-political boundaries of any particular nation-state cannot be seen as one unified and necessarily distinguishable group. The case of the Indonesian Chinese bears testament to this, where Chinese identities vary across regions within Indonesia itself. Similarly, in the case of Thailand, the levels of cultural assimilation through intermarriage further problematize the view of the Chinese as one homogenous entity. Taken from the point of view of a regional whole, Chinese ethnicity cannot be isolated by any particular identity marker or ethnic boundary, but rather manifests itself through the complex phenomenon of multiple Chineseness.

In the process of linking a primordial identity with the notion of multiple Chinese, the book suggests that ethnic identity should be conceptualized in a model as *center-periphery identity*. At the center or core, Chinese ethnic identity is viewed in primordial terms, that is, it is "deeply rooted, given at birth, and largely unchangeable" (van den Berghe, 1978: 401). By using physiological (fair skinned, dark hair, slanted eyes), genotypical (blood) and descent (born Chinese) traits, it suggests that Chinese identity is irreducible and ascribed, natural and a given. Not only is it primordial, at the center, identity takes on a more expressive nature, rather than being instrumental. Drawing from De Vos and Romannuci-Ross (1982), it can be argued that at the center, in such private places as home, community halls, clan associations and social get togethers, ethnicity is manifested expressively to meet personal social and emotional needs. Here, identity not only operates at the personal level, but at the same time is utilized at the group level for group cohesion (see Tong and Chan, 1998).

In contrast, at the periphery or on the fringe, as opposed to the center, ethnic identity is more instrumental rather than expressive. As opposed to the private nature of ethnicity at the core, at the fringes, in public places and where there are transactions and negotiations with other ethnic groups, particularly members of the host society, we observe a more situationist view of ethnic identity. Here, we find multiple Chineseness; ethnic identity becomes changeable, culturally and ecologically defined, and situationally sensitive. Ethnic identification becomes a "strategic" choice by individuals who, in other circumstances, would choose other forms of group membership as a means of gaining some power and privilege (Bell, 1975: 17). Thus, identity at the periphery is achieved, rather than ascribed. Depending on the social context, the Chinese present certain aspects of their ethnic identity to deal with the host population, and the business of living an everyday life as a migrant minority in a new host society. In the strategic use of ethnic identity, ethnicity becomes more fluid and more plastic.

Thus, for the Chinese in Southeast Asia, there is a core primary identity, best expressed and nurtured in private. This is, in a sense, a master identity. The Chinese individual also has a secondary identity, one that displays different facets of its self in different social situations. Once the primary birth principle of classification at the center is satisfied, the secondary principle or plural conceptions of identity is often

invoked, stressing individualistic, voluntary and autonomous expressions. For the Chinese in Southeast Asia, ethnic identity is not either primordial or situational; it is both, at the same time (see Tong and Chan, 2001b).

Sociologically, however, the critical question is not that primordialism, or race, is used as a marker of Chinese identity in Southeast Asia, but rather why this is so. Why is there a racialization of ethnicity? There are various reasons. First, "racing" ethnicity allows the Chinese a mechanism for the exclusion of others. Using genotypical characteristics, such as bloodline and descent ensures boundary maintenance, controlling an individual's entry into and exit out of the group. Many informants, for example, made the point that one cannot become Chinese if not born Chinese. It is thus this constructed ethnic boundary that defines the group. Second, racial differentiation of the other becomes the basis of the construction of the self. By privileging skin color, and through contrastive effect, it allows for ethnic differentiation. Being migrants, and in close contact with other ethnic groups in everyday life, using primordial markers allows for the creation of a *contrastive identity*. A Chinese is a Chinese because he does not look Malay, or Thai, or Vietnamese. It can be suggested that in multi-ethnic societies, contrastive identity takes on greater significance. This is especially so when other ethnic markers such as language, religion and education becomes increasingly amorphous, and thus phenotypical distinctiveness gain functional salience.

By drawing on phenotypical and genotypical traits, ethnic identity, for the Chinese in Southeast Asia takes on a "naturalness" in quality. Naturalness suggests that identity is a given, permanent, a taken for grantedness and therefore not socially constructed. Invoking primordialism and "naturalness" is a consequence of the diasporic conditions of the Chinese. As Bauman (2000) argues, the need to put together and rearrange identity is stronger in the context of an immigrant population living as a minority in the host societies of others. However, in Southeast Asia, this arrangement must be seen in the context of having to deal with the imposition of identity, both by the state and members of the host society. Drawing on naturalness of ethnic identity allows the Chinese to mediate and resist the imposition of the state. By constructing ethnic identity as natural categories, identity takes on an objective reality. Once a Chinese, always a Chinese. Even when confronted with evidence of the subjective nature of phenotypical categorizations, informants are seemingly untroubled by the fact that there is a gradation of skin and hair colors among the Chinese, informants in the various countries in Southeast Asia insist on the primordial as the markers of identity. The hair and skin color may be slightly varied, but it is still Chinese blood. While it can be argued that primordialism is itself a social construction, and therefore of a subjective nature, what is important is that many of the actors take these subjective constructions as objectively validated: "it is in the blood, there is nothing you can do to change it."

Third, the colonial influence must be taken into account. In Southeast Asia, the colonial masters, including the British in Burma, Malaya and Singapore, the Dutch in Indonesia, the French in Indochina, and the Spanish in the Philippines, utilized essentialized racial classifications and policies of ascriptive ethnicity in the management of the indigenous population. For example, the British in Malaya

assigned economic and social roles based on race (Abraham, 1983; Stockwell, 1982; Trocki, 1992). The Malays were essentially peasants and rice-cultivators, with a few with aristocratic ties recruited into the lower ranks of the civil service. The Chinese were either mining coolies or middlemen engaged in trade and commerce; and the Indians labored on rubber estates or public works.

The colonial ascription of ethnicity was based on social Darwinist assumptions of the development of the human population. Indeed, the roles ascribed to the various ethnic groups were justified on such ideological grounds. In the colonial mind, for example, Indians were regarded as docile and well behaved, the Chinese on the other hand had more self reliance and the enterprise to rise above manual labor (Abraham, 1983: 24), and the Malays were regarded as rural, poor and backwards, most appropriate to the role of food producers and agriculturalists (Lian, 2001). These racial categorizations were carried over into post-colonial Southeast Asia. For example, even in present day Singapore, ethnic groups are classified along racial rather than cultural lines (see Benjamin, 1976; Siddique, 1990).

In using primordialist sentiments, ethnicity identity takes on an additional dimension of objectifying cultural values in racial terms. This operates at two levels. Firstly, by using descent and bloodline, it separates the insider from outsider in absolute terms. Secondly, and at a more subtle level, cultural values become racialized. Thus, cultural ideas, such as the Chinese being hardworking, filial, or are good in business, are seen as quintessentially Chinese, as if such cultural values or attributes are inherently, even genetically Chinese, differentiating them from the "natives" or indigenous people, who are carefree and not good with money, etc. The Chinese, in doing this, racialize the "other," as such stereotypes are conceived as inherent in the locals. This, interesting enough, is one of the reasons given by the informants for their resistance towards intermarriage with the indigenes, as intermarriage contaminates the purity of descent. As one informant exemplifies, "if a Chinese man marries a local, then their children will not be good businessmen."⁸

In doing so, there is a conflation of race and culture. Cultural attributes are not learnt, but intrinsically Chinese. Similarly, the natives are implicitly laid back, or not good businessmen, and not due to historical or environmental reasons. Through racialization, cultural attributes become natural or reflecting nature. Using physiological or genetic determinism, culture takes on an intrinsic or inevitable quality. Guillaumin (1995: 62) argues that using race as a scientific concept is fraught with dangers as it forms the basis of discrimination and oppression. However, whether the concept of race "obscure(s) real social relationships," or "conceals discrimination," is, in my view, irrelevant. Racialization acts as a mechanism for exclusion and exclusivity. In the fieldwork in many of the countries in Southeast Asia, the vocabulary of ethnic relations is always framed racially.

The critical question is then why, in Southeast Asia, do both the indigenous majority, and more importantly, the Chinese themselves, use the discourse of race for ethnic differentiation? It will be argued that racializing the other creates distinctiveness. Drawing on Guillaumin (1995: 65), using "natural entities" or "races" make the Chinese "genetically distinct and therefore, in the context of somatic determinism, politically, intellectually and socially homogenous, forming closed