

专题论文: 多元族群与多元文化

Feature Articles: Multi-ethnic and Multicultural

# CHINESE-MALAY RELATIONS IN CHINESE MALAYSIANS' EVERYDAY SUBJECTIVITIES\*

华裔马来西亚人日常主体视角下的华马关系

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## Abstract

Since 1970s, studies on racial or ethnic relations in Malaysia have become popular in academic world. In the studies of Chinese-Malay relations, most writings are based on macro-level analyses, which mainly focus on social structures mainly in politics and economy but not the social actors. The characteristics of the social actors are always assumed as fixed, passive and homogenous. The abilities, creativity and roles of social actors are often underestimated. Therefore, there are very little micro-level studies conducted to understand the social construction of Chinese-Malay relations in Malaysia. This study is an attempt to scrutinize how Chinese in Malaysia perceives Malays and relates to them in everyday life. In this research, the author has employed

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the adductive approach, which refers to the process that privileges the social actors' account to generate social scientific knowledge. For that, the in-depth interview method was applied to gather data from few respondents. The result shows that, as social actors, lay-Chinese have their own, though often disorganized, logical ways and methods in conceptualizing their relationship with Malays. In the "stimulated" and "binary oppositional" subjectivities, the construction of the Chinese-Malay relation is determined by the stock of knowledge, contexts and also the Chinese' interactions with others.

**Keywords:** Chinese-Malay relations, Chinese Malaysians, social actors, subjectivity

### 摘要

自1970年代以来,马来西亚族群或种族关系的研究越来越受到瞩目。在华人-马来人关系的研究领域,大部分论文都属于宏观分析,至于微观研究却非常少。那些宏观分析大多聚焦于社会结构,集中于政治与经济,而非社会行为者。社会行为者的特征总是被假定为是不变的、被动的、同质的,他们的能力、创造力与作用常被低估。本文尝试审视,一般华人如何看待马来人,以及如何把自己与对方在日常生活中连接起来。本文采用溯因方法,也就是指着重于社会行为者的叙述来产生社会科学知识的方法。本文采用深度访谈来收集受访者的意见。研究结果表明,作为社会行为者,尽管经常显得混乱,但一般华人有着自己的逻辑与方法,去概念化他们与马来人的关系。在“受激发”与“二元对立”的主体性中,华人与马来人的关系建构,是由知识库存、脉络以及华人与其他人之互动所决定的。

**关键词:** 华人-马来人关系、华裔马来西亚人、社会行为者、主体性

### Introduction

The issue of ethnic relations has become significant even before Malaya achieved her independence in 1957, and national unity and social integration are always an important agenda in all the long-term national developmental plans, namely New Economy Policy (NEP), National Development Policy (NDP) and Vision 2020 Policy. Thus, the studies of ethnic relations in Malaysia are inevitable and important

due to her societal nature, a multi-ethnic society. Since a violent tragedy occurred on 13 May 1969, the studies on ethnic relations in Malaysia have become popular in academic writings.

Over all, majority of the previous studies examined the issues of ethnic relations in Malaysia through a macro perspective, which mainly focus on social structures but not the social actors. In this writing, the author zeroes in the Chinese-Malay relations in Malaysia by employing a micro-level analysis. This writing is a modest attempt to scrutinize how Chinese Malaysians perceive Malays through expressing their subjectivities that form their identity in everyday life. In this research, the author has employed the abductive approach, which refers to the process that privileges the social actors' account to generate social scientific knowledge.

The article begins by providing a general description of the multi-ethnic background of Malaysia and the nature of Chinese-Malay relations. This followed by a presentation of the theoretical framework and concepts employed in the analysis. The final section is a discussion of Chinese-Malay relationships from the perspectives of Chinese Malaysians' subjectivities in everyday life.

### **Chinese-Malay Relations in a Multi-ethnic Society**

In the studies of ethnic relations in Malaysia, Chinese-Malay relations play a vital role visibly. In view of the historical background, Malaysian society inherited a multiracial or multicultural nature after gaining independence from British in 1957. Generally, the ethnic composition of Malaysia comprises two major populist components, namely, Bumiputera, literally means "prince of the soil", or indigenous peoples, and non-Bumiputera, or non-indigenous peoples. The Bumiputera group consists largely of the Malays and the aboriginal communities of Peninsular Malaysia and also the various "natives" of Sabah and Sarawak, which include numerous groups, such as the Kadazan, Murut and Bajau of Sabah; and the Iban, Melanau, Bidayu, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Berawan and Penan of Sarawak. On the other hand, the Chinese and Indians form the majority of the non-Bumiputera component whose



presence in Malaysia became important with the waves of immigration encouraged by the British colonial administration during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Khoo, B.T. 2004). The division of these two major components of ethnicity in Malaysia is based on the often-contested theories of migration.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the conclusions of migration theories, the status of the Malays and other indigenous groups as enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution is the conferment of special rights and privileges.

In the aspects of religion, there has been an official tendency to differentiate the population along religious, the most important distinction being that made between Muslims, who are predominantly Malays, and non-Muslims. There are sizeable numbers of indigenous non-Malay Muslim in Sabah and Sarawak, as well as Indian Muslims in Peninsular Malaysia. Other Malaysians are classified, or regard themselves, as non-Muslims. As stated in the Malaysian Constitution, all Malays are Muslim, they speak the Malay language and adopt Malay customs and way of life. They also converse in their own local dialects and some still place their faith in animistic practices. Similarly, the indigenous groups in the Malay Peninsular and Sabah and Sarawak are not homogenous in their religions and languages. Likewise, majority of the Indians in Malaysia are Hindus and speak Tamil language. They also embrace different religions (such as Sikhism, Islam and Christianity) and speak different languages (Telegu, Punjabi etc.). The Chinese on the other hand has a complicated background of language and belief system.<sup>2</sup>

The foreign, particularly British, dominated the Malaysian economy during the early years of independence. The Malaysia's political economy which shaped by colonial capitalism, had created certain patterns of uneven development, economic disparities and social divisions. Income and sectoral imbalances between Malays (Bumiputera) and non-Malays (non Bumiputera) and become disproportionately high by the 1970s. Chinese capital maintained a sufficiently strong presence in comprador activities, banking, small-scale manufacturing, retailing and services so that the "ubiquitous activity of the Chinese middleman" lent weight to the "popular misconception that commerce is controlled by the Chinese" (Khoo, B.T. 2004). The



poverty incidence was much higher among Malay households compared to Chinese households. Political control and the administration of the state apparatus had been mostly turned over to Malay aristocrats who had been trained for civil service by the colonial state.

Although the National Alliance government, which mainly comprised the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), came into power with the 1957 elections, was able to achieve economic growth after British rule ended, it was unsuccessful in reducing economic imbalances between the racial groups. The Alliance protected foreign economic interests, preserved the position of domiciled Chinese capital, and largely ceded control of the state apparatus to the Malay aristocrats who led UMNO.

As economic imbalances deepened, Malay criticism against the Alliance Government increased and they appealed to the state for a more interventionist role to protect and to promote Malay economic interests. These economic imbalances became untenable in the late 1960s, and reached a peak with the 13 May 1969 racial riots. The national Alliance was finally convinced of the necessity of implementing affirmative action to create a more balanced society. Consequently, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970, which accorded the Bumiputera preferential treatment in order to correct the racial imbalances (Lee, H.G. 1997).

On the other hand, in view of the population, the ethnic distribution has not altered considerably in view of the rapid growth of the Malaysian population. The two main components of the population, i.e. Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera have been regarded as momentous in sustaining the balance of the country's demography. Zeroing in the socio-political context, the Chinese-Malay relationship represents the relationship between the two biggest components of the population and this relationship plays a pivotal role in the politics of Malaysia's nation building.

Nevertheless, the country leaders since independence have been struggling to create a national identity by balancing the above Chinese-Malay relationship. The national identity, i.e. "united Malaysian nation" or *Bangsa Malaysia* is characterized by national unity and integration among the citizen. However, attempts to construct

the identity-of-intent are always full of obstacles or hindrances. Numerous related events happened in the last decade in the context of Sino-Malay relationship. A few notable events were Suqiu (诉求)<sup>3</sup> in August 1999, the issues of Chinese primary school in Damansara and unfairness in local university student's intake. Furthermore, there were questions asked on the standard of Matriculation qualification compared to the STPM (A-levels equivalent) because they were the basis of university entrance qualification. The former is an alternative examination system designed to cater mainly for Bumiputera and this was a source of discontent and suspicion for the Chinese. The above issues contributed to the already suspicion and insecure feeling of the Chinese community in relation to their status and position in this country.

The uniqueness of the background of this country and the complicated Chinese-Malay relations mentioned above has triggered numerous researches and discussions on the ethnic relations in Malaysia. In the studies of Chinese-Malay relations, majority writings are based on macro-level analysis (for instances, Nobaya and Zaid 2006; Wang 2001), which mainly focus on social structures but not the social actors. The characteristics of the social actor are always assumed as fixed, passive and homogenous. Their abilities, creativity and roles of social actors are often overlooked. There is very little micro-level studies conducted to understand the formation of Sino-Malay relations in Malaysia. Therefore, the author attempts to study how Chinese-Malay relations formed in Chinese Malaysians' subjectivities in everyday life.

### **The Adductive Approach**

Hitherto, social researchers employ two major perspectives, namely macro and micro, to scrutinize social realities. In terms of methodology, both macro and micro levels respectively differ from orientation and technique. From the macro perspective, ontologically, researchers assume society as a complex of interrelated social structures or institutions. Thus, the formation of social realities such as identity and ethnic relations are regarded as product of correlation of social institutions or structures in

the society. The macro researchers emphasize on the roles and functions of structures in determining individual identity and the nature of ethnic relations. They assume that ethnic relation is influenced by alteration of social structure. The orientation of the macro research is to hypothesize the correlation between ethnic relation and social structure or institutions like politic, economy, education, culture and religion in society. In this theoretical framework, epistemologically, the construction of the knowledge of identity and ethnic relations is derived from the proven hypotheses.

To verify the research hypotheses, conventionally macro researchers employ deductive approach. In this approach, the main aim is to test the assumptions or hypotheses. In this process, the abstract variables are concretized to computable numerical value. Traditionally, data is collected by using methods such as survey. In addition, the questionnaire used in the survey is created according to the research hypotheses. Obviously, this kind of research methodology is very much "author-oriented", which means the researcher determines which facets of social reality are to be scrutinized. Thus, it is not sufficient to employ such methodology to understand how the Chinese-Malay relationship is formed in the Chinese's subjectivity in their everyday interactions.

Back to the main discussion of this writing, the primary purpose is to understand the interpretation of social actors i.e. the Chinese Malaysians' subjectivities towards their identity in comparing to the Malay as a reflective social reality of their relation to the Malays. Although the perspective of this study is also at the micro level that emphasizes on social actors and assumes they have the capability and creativity to conceptualize about them, the common used inductive approach is not suitable. This is because of the focus of inductive approach is to understand social events and to examine the causal relations between them. The interest of this study is to focus on the knowledge and definition of social actors, i.e. the Chinese on their identity that reflects the Chinese-Malay relationship.

In my opinion, the abductive approach suggested by Norman Blaikie (2000) is more suitable for the purpose of this research. In short, this approach combines the theoretical thinking in hermeneutics, phenomenology and interpretivism especially



the works of Shchutzh (1967) and Giddens (1984). The primary focus of this approach is to examine social life by understanding the motives and accounts of social actors. Therefore, the abductive approach is a more appropriate approach to be employed to determine the everyday concepts, meanings and motives of the social actors such that to construct the technical accounts from the everyday lay accounts.<sup>4</sup>

To apply the approach in this research, ontologically the social world is assumed as human's product and all social actions is purposive and with motive. Ethnic relation is a form of social reality that is formed by social actors. It is created by individuals and its existence should not be separated from human activities. Social reality is deemed as a product of the process of negotiating on the meanings of behavior and situation in actors' daily life. Social reality is a complex socially constructed shared knowledge that consists of meaning, cultural symbol and social institution.

Consequently, to understand social behaviors, we have to understand the hidden meanings of the behavior. Social life is assumed to evolve around the meanings that are shared and created in the process of social interaction in everyday life. Based on this assumption, the Chinese-Malay relation is also assumed as a product through the Chinese's daily interaction using language and concepts that are understood by them. As a social reality, ethnic relation is multi-faceted and always changes according to situation. Its validity is contingent upon individuals' social life.

From epistemological aspect, what is social reality is based on the social actors' belief and interpretation. The scientific social knowledge should be derived from everyday meaning and concepts, and shared social construction of knowledge. In other words, this micro-level discussion of identity and ethnic relations should focus on how the everyday interpreted meaning is transferred into the form of academic knowledge (Blaikie 2000: 116).

The primary aim of this writing is not to generate a generalization of Chinese-Malay relation in Malaysia but to form an "analytical generalization" (Yin 1989; 1993). Twelve Chinese were interviewed and questioned generally about their background and how do they see themselves as a Chinese in relation to the Malay. The recorded narratives were then validated by asking the subjects to clarify the

narratives.

## **Subjectivity and Everyday Identity**

Why shall we discuss subjectivity and identity in understanding Chinese-Malay relationship? The issue of ethnic relation or ethnicity may not exist if any social group does not concern about their ethnic identity. In other words, one will not examine his or her ethnic identity without the presence of a different ethnic group in his or her social life to compare with. Thus, the studies of identity and ethnicity are interrelated, and the study of ethnic relations is inevitable but to involve the studies of identity.

Social scientists always face challenges in identity studies especially on the definition of the term identity itself. What is identity? Undeniably, identity is a complex term. Its original word, *idem*, embeds the meanings of “sameness” and “continuity”. Simultaneously, it also incorporates the meaning of “permanence amid change” and “unity in diversity”. Based on the interpretations of these meanings, the nature of identity is concurrently manifested in both fixed and dynamic forms.

To approach such a multifaceted subject matter, different disciplines or schools of thought have suggested and employed various methodologies to scrutinize the construction of identity. Generally, in social science and humanities, there are two major fields in the study of identity, i.e. psychodynamic and sociological (Plummer 2003).

In brief, the psychodynamic tradition started with Sigmund Freud's theory of identification. This theory suggests that the individual identity is formed through the process of how an individual assimilates and combines objects and people during his childhood. This theory emphasizes on the inner force of psychic structure or mental abilities as possess a continuous identity, which is similar to the view of Lichtenstein (1977); this is the ability to sustain similarity in the continuous alteration.

Nevertheless, Erik Erikson was the one who expanded on the concept of identity in the psychodynamic theoretical framework. He deemed identity as a process that is located in an individual and cultural communal force. Following this, Erikson

developed the concept of “identity crisis” during World War II when studying patients who had lost the sense of personal sameness and historical continuity. Eventually, Erikson generalized identity crisis in the context of human lifespan. According to Erikson, personal crisis and historical moments are inter-related. Subsequently, the concept of identity crisis was used as a common term and has triggered other concepts such as “mid-life crisis” (Plummer 2003).

In sociological tradition, Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) initiated the analysis of identity at the micro level. Micro-sociological perspective focuses on the formation of “me” and scrutinizes how individual assumes his “self” through interpersonal interaction. The concept of “self” refers to a process of reflexivity that results from dialectic relations between “I” and “me”. In James (1890) and Mead (1934)’s formulation, “self” refers to a reflexive phenomenon that developed in social interactions and it is contingent upon the nature of human social language. Thus, the concept of “self” has provided a philosophical fundamental ground for social psychology to investigate “self-concept”, although the concept of “self” is inaccessible in empirical observation.

Compared to the concept of “self”, “self-concept” refers to a “product” in reflexive activities. It is a concept possessed by an individual as a human being in addition to physical, social and spiritual or moral aspects. Rosenberg (1979) defines “self-concept” as “the totality of an individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (quoted from Gecas 1982: 3). If “identity” is defined in this context, its meaning is focused on “self” as an object that provides structure and content to the idea of self-concept, and to sustain “self” in a social system.

Therefore, the inter-related relationship between “self” and society is apparent in the symbolic interactionism tradition. In this tradition, there are two major fields, i.e. the processual interactionists and structural interactionists, which are different in the aspects of conceptualization and assumption on the self-society relation, substantive foci and methodology (Gecas 1982: 10).

In processual interactionism, Blumer (1969), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Becker (1964) and Stone (1962), emphasize on the construction and sustaining of identity



through the process of negotiation in the context of social situation. The negotiation of identity is the main aspect of individual's effort in defining situation and constructing reality. This meaning is deemed as a product in a flexible and reciprocal interaction process. Concurrently, action and interaction are considered as uncertain. All these have caused the nature of "I" becoming unpredictable. The construction of identity for "self" and others in a particular situation has become problematic because of the weak consensus within the actors. Thus, the cognitive activity of "role-taking" is important in such a dialectical process. This also means that identity in this perspective is situational, emergent, reciprocal and negotiated. In addition, scholars in processual interactionism see self-concept as an inseparable cause and effect in social interaction (Gecas 1982: 10-11).

On the other hand, structural interactionists focus on the concept of "role" as an entrée to evaluate identity and self-concept. Identity is viewed more as the internalized roles. The intimate relationship between role and identity is illustrated in the concept "role-identity". This concept relates self-conceptions with social structures. Role is considered as a part of social structure, and it also provides ground for understanding self-concept in an organizational context, i.e. as a multi-dimensional construction of "role-identity". For instances, Stryker (1979) suggested, "the self is seen as embracing multiple identities linked to the roles and role relationships that constitute significant elements of social structures."

In addition, Gordon (1976) advocates how role relates individual with social structure: "the value aspects of roles connect persons to culture; the normative aspects of roles provide motivations to conduct and structure to social action; and 'sense-making' or interpretive aspects of roles determine much of personal cognition, attitudinal predispositions, memories, and plans." The concept of role is typically viewed as a prediction of an individual reaction according to his formal and informal status in a social system. However, "role" and "status" are used interchangeably especially in the context of identity.

The structure of self-concept is perceived as an organization of hierarchical "role-identity" of an individual. The characteristic of self-concept can be understood

through the concept of commitment. In this “self-structure” understanding, the degree of commitment on an identity influences the significance of an identity in guiding an individual’s behavior. The degree of commitment is determined by the nature and locus of the “role-set” and “identity-set”, i.e. the identity network and relations within the roles of an identity.

Well, back to the issue on how we should conceptualize the relations between subjectivity and identity. The author agrees to the notion of Barker (2000). According to Barker (2000: 165), subjectivity refers to a situation on how human being exists and the process of how we live as a human being, or in other words, how we are constructed as a subject. As a social subject, we are subjected to the social process that molds us to exist as “subject to” others and ourselves. The concept that we adopt to see ourselves is referred to as “self-identity” and the expectation of others on us represents our “social identity”. Both “self-identity” and “social identity” forms of identity are in narrative form. Thus, according to Barker, to understand what subjectivity is, it is crucial to ask: “what is human being?” In addition, to explore the question of identity, we need to ask: “how do we see ourselves and how do others see us?”

Besides Barker, according to Weedon (2004: 19), identity is better understood as fixed and constant when an individual is in a common mode of subjectivity. Ideologically, identity functions to limit the plurality of subjectivity in a discursive situation, it provides individuals with a parameter to see who they are and what their positions are. This process involves recruiting subject into a specific meaning and value that is formed in a particular discourse that encourages identification. Therefore, Weedon also suggests, “identity is perhaps best understood as a limited and temporary fixing for the individual of a particular mode of subjectivity as apparently what one is.”

In short, subjectivity and identity are interrelated. As discussed by Barker and Weedon, subjectivity is unfixed and alters in different situation or context, and identity serves a function to provide a discursive platform to limit the dynamic subjectivity. Thus, the above discussion indicates that the identity discourse is inevitable but

relates to subjectivity.

## **Chinese-Malay Relations and Chinese Identities**

As argued by anti-essentialists, identities are not things which exist; they have no essential or universal qualities. They are instead discursive constructions, the product of discourses or regulated ways of speaking about the world. In other words, identities are constituted and made by representations, notably language (Barker 2000). Therefore, as we have discussed above, the concept of identity and subjectivity are closely related and inseparable. At the same time, the notions of Chinese-Malay relations are embedded in the Chinese's narratives of their identities.

Now, I would like to discuss how subjects as social actors define their identities. Generally, the subjects' answers are dynamic and subjective. They use their own set of logic and rationality to justify their answers. Perhaps the answers are not as systematic as the argument in scientific writings, yet according to W.I Thomas (1928) in his theorem: "If people define situation as real, they are real in their consequences." In other words, one can turn his or her socially constructed inner realities such as perceptions, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, or feeling, into socially observable outer realities like behaviors, actions or activities. There are two everyday identities identified and categorized in the subjects' discourse.

### **Chinese as Hardworking, Flexible and Passive "Survivalist"<sup>5</sup>**

In 19th century, the Chinese migrated to Malaya as sojourners mainly to gather fortune. The Chinese today have settled and become citizens of this country. However, the cultural traits of the early immigrant still can be traced, especially the "hardworking" and an attitude of "seek food" ("找吃" in Chinese language, means to survive). While maintaining these characteristics, the Chinese also have developed other traits like passive, quiet and flexibility due to the economic and politic condition of this country. One of the respondents, WSM said, "Chinese in Malaysia is *ming*



*zhe bao shen* (明哲保身)”, which means Chinese in Malaysia is passive and do not interfere into other’s affairs. The Chinese are self-centered and only focus in taking good care of their family life so that they can live a comfortable life. In other words, Chinese reserve to reveal their opinion openly especially on their political status or right.

As a senior citizen of this country, LQM who has lived here more than 70 years expressed similar view as WSM. LQM emphasized:

We Chinese in Malaysia only want to survive (找吃). Not all Chinese want to be politicians. We do not know much. We work day and night. We go out in the morning and return at dusk. We do not know much what is happening around us. I have not involved in any political activities. I cannot speak well. I cannot read well. I am not fit to join politic. The most important thing to me is to take good care of my family and myself and not to disturb others. We must think before we do anything. If others treat me nicely, I will treat him nicely too. If others treat me badly, I will try to avoid meeting with them.

LQM also said:

What I see, Chinese in Malaysia just want to survive (找吃). If there is no racial problem, Malaysia is relatively a good place to live. Compared to the Chinese in Indonesia and Philippine, their life is always being threatened. I think our government [refer to the Malay] is better. The most important thing is peaceful and safety, to continue to survive (找吃) and finish my life here.

What can we conclude from LQM’s narrative is, Chinese are “survivalists” and to continue surviving, Chinese have to be passive in fighting for equal rights and status, and to avoid unnecessary problems. Chinese should remain silent and avoid confronting other races even though they are not treated fairly.

Another respondent, LNK, highlighted that Chinese identity is flexible and situational, i.e. it changes according to the demand such that Chinese can continue to survive (找吃). He said:

Although our government is not aiding Chinese, Chinese is quiet and searching their ways to survive and to make money. The Chinese will not go against the government because they only want to find fortune. In the past, Chinese lived with difficulties, that was the reason they moved out from China to Malaya and other countries. To survive, Chinese worked very hard. For instance, if other works 8 hours, Chinese is willing to work 10 hours. Majority of the Chinese are very patient. Only small amount of them go against the government. Those Chinese in politics are not fighting for Chinese's rights and they are not maintaining the Chinese identity, but only to gain benefit for themselves. They only act like they are helping Chinese. They (the Chinese politicians) follow whatever told by the Malay leaders. If they are asked to wear *songkok*, they will wear it. They also always speak only in Malay language. However, the Chinese still support them. Without them, Chinese's situation will be worse; at least these Chinese politicians can bring business opportunities for others. For example, getting government contracts and collaborating with the Malays. This is the most important thing. There is no point for the Chinese to be Agong if there are no benefits.

It is obvious that in LNK's narrative, he saw Chinese identity as "survivalists", to making a living and make money. According to him, this is because of their historical background. The Chinese have inherited their ancestor's character, i.e. to be patient, quiet and hardworking.

Generally, although these are only voices from a few lay Chinese about their identity, but these narratives might reflect overall Chinese's attitude towards other races especially the Malay. The passive attitude makes the Chinese only focus in making a living and refrains themselves from a meaningful interaction with the Malays. For instance, a research carried out by the Merdeka Research Centre in 2006 indicates that relatively most of the Chinese perceive that the nature of ethnic integration in Malaysia as superficial. Furthermore, due to their passive attitude, the research also shows that majority of the Chinese (84%) have mistakenly thought that Hari Raya Puasa is the new year celebration for the Malays and 86% of them thought that Deepavali is the new year celebration for the Indians.

### Chinese as Sensitive “Second Class” Citizen

Other than defining Chinese identity as hardworking, flexible and passive “survivalists”, the respondents see the identity in the context of status. For instance, SL said:

In this country, we understand that we are second-class citizens. The Malays always have the advantage. All these have been happening since long time ago. It is useless for us to worry about it. We cannot do anything to fix our status. We have to face it and accept it. The government will not treat the Chinese in equal way. Malaysia is a Malay country. Isn't it Malay-sia for Malay? This is a Malay place.

Although SL considered herself as second-class citizen and not receiving the equal treatment, she insisted that she still identified herself to this country. However, she also admitted that the identification was not involving the feeling of love to this country and was subjected to change in the future. She added:

I am part of this country. I am a citizen of this country. If not, where should I go? I have thought of leaving this place. If I know any place is better than this place, I will leave. If you ask me whether I love this country, I don't think I do. This is only a place where I grew up. If I have a chance, I will leave. But it is not easy, it is not easy to find a perfect country. Malaysia is not the country that I like but I don't hate this country because I have been living here for a long time.

Other respondents also shared this point of view. WSM saw this matter in an extreme mode. She felt that the status of Chinese in Malaysia is worse than an “adopted child” is and always live in uncertainty and insecurity. She expressed that the anxiety occurs when listening to the Malay politicians' unfair speeches towards the Chinese, notably issues in education. She deemed this kind of news as a “mental bombing” on her. The unequal treatment first experienced during her study in Form 6 when she saw the Malay students received government aid of RM200 per month.



According to her:

All Malay students received the money regardless they are rich or poor. Even though some of them did not apply for the aid, they were awarded too. Yet, there are many very poor Chinese in the class but they never received anything.

Another respondent, LKC, also saw the unequal treatment on the Chinese but he saw in a slightly positive aspect. He considered the status and treatment received by the Chinese better than the Indians in Malaysia. From his point of view, majority of the Indians are living in poverty. Therefore, the Chinese in Malaysia can be categorized between “first-class” and “second-class”. Although Chinese are not treated well, they are able to survive (找吃). Besides LKC, TAL shared the same opinion. She emphasized that it is proper for the Malays to receive help from the government because they are Bumiputera in this country. The Malays should be granted financial help because they are in need. She said:

We [Chinese] are still able to make enough money and live a comfortable life. Therefore, generally, living as a Chinese in Malaysia is good and okay. If compared to the Indians, their standard of living and economy is much lower than ours is. This is because that Chinese have a stronger background. The earlier Chinese had built a strong base, for instance, the schooling system, *hui guan* (会馆 or association) and business associations, to help the new generation.

TAL's positive attitude towards the government's unequal treatment on Chinese was also caused by her confidence on Chinese's abilities and reputation. She said:

Many overseas companies in Malaysia see Chinese as better and more useful than other races. When they select worker, they prefer to employ Chinese because they always see Chinese having better characters, such as willing to learn new knowledge and skills, more aggressive and always improving themselves. According to my Japanese superior and my friends, Chinese always like to learn, improve and aim high. Other races are not as good as the Chinese although there are some of them are as good as the Chinese.

According to my observation, most of the respondents expressed their anxiety and held the discussion on Chinese identity as “second-class” citizen as a sensitive issue. “Is this too sensitive to discuss?”, “Will this bring problem to me? Because you are recording it.”, “Please off record what I said just now! It is too sensitive!” and “Will I be ‘ISA’ed because I talk about this sensitive issue?”<sup>6</sup> These were the responds shown by the respondents during the interview although they spoke in a flippant attitude. However, all respondents in this study refused to reveal their real name in the research.

The sensitive attitude on “sensitive issue” in everyday conversation and interaction is common in the Chinese community. This attitude serves as a control mechanism in social actors’ sub-consciousness. This sensitivity guides the social actors’ behavior and thus forms a harmonic relation between them and the Malays although at a superficial level. Therefore, the interpretation of social actors also forms the social order in society.

### **The Formation of Chinese-Malay Relations in Chinese’s Subjectivities**

How is the Chinese-Malay relationship formed when the Chinese defines their identity? As mentioned above, the Chinese-Malay relationship is rooted in the Chinese’s subjectivities. Generally, from the respondents’ narratives, the formation of Chinese’s subjectivities could be understood in the interrelations of the three major parts of the process, i.e. source of knowledge, context and interaction process.

Based on the stock of knowledge, the social actors define their identity. Undeniably, almost all respondents in this research acknowledged that they had not ever thought about the issue of identity and being Chinese. This form of knowledge is regarded as “taken-for-granted” knowledge, i.e. respondents had not really thought through the issue in detail but they assumed that they know the issue (Garfinkel 1967).

This research shows that the source of the knowledge of Chinese on their

identity includes experience, reading and socialization. As a knowledgeable social actor, respondent has the ability to categorize their experiences and to use them when needed (Schutz 1967; Water 1994). Majority of respondents indicate that the major source of their knowledge is from newspaper reading. Besides, they also claimed that their ability to analyze social facts, reality or symbol in the social works was learned from the process of socialization, which can be divided to formal, mainly at the school, and informal socialization, i.e. family and peer group influence.

In the aspect of context, how respondents defined their Chinese identity was influenced by the context they were in. Context can be general and specific. A general context refers to shared social norms among the respondents. For instance, most of the respondents deemed the discussion of Chinese's status and comparing to the Malays is sensitive and may bring harm to them. Simultaneously, the respondent may differ from the aspect of values because they are in different institutions and having different cultural background, such as education, religion, family, stages of life and linguistic ability.

In the process of interaction, respondents as social actors are active and alert to interpret social facts and symbols in their social world. However, the significance of the symbols or social facts is contingent upon which context of a respondent is in. In other words, only relevant symbols or social facts will be focused and employed by the particular respondent in a particular context. Thus, as it is found in this study, only related issues and problems selected by respondents function as stimulants to them when discussing identity. The stimulants function through media or social interaction in the respondent's everyday life. Eventually, the issue or problem is interpreted and the respondent acts accordingly. The interpretation could be sustained or even strengthened when there is an inter-subjectivity, or it could be reconstructed when the interpretation is different. All these depend on the interaction of respondent with other social actors.

In the micro perspective, individual in society is assumed as an agency or subject, who has the ability to think, feel, act and interact freely. Simultaneously, they learn, assign and reassign meaning to their actions and others' actions. Thus, social reality is



constructed by the individuals' interactions and their intersubjectivity. In the context of identity formation, Chinese's subjectivity, i.e. how they see themselves as subject in the society, can be divided into two major forms, namely stimulated subjectivity and binary oppositional subjectivity.

### **Stimulated Subjectivity**

As a subject in the society, the Chinese actively interact and is always stimulated by the symbols in the social world. The presence of the stimulants, cause the social actors to think and evaluate who they are. Thus, this kind of subjectivity is labeled as stimulated subjectivity.

The stimulant is conveyed primarily through popular media like newspaper and television. Advertisements, news and commends in newspaper function as a medium to stimulate individual to evaluate themselves. However, the nature of the interaction process between individual and stimulant is subjective. Symbols displayed in the media and other symbols like other's behavior, can be interpreted differently by an individual. Nevertheless, it can be also interpreted as shared meaning or intersubjectivity.

As pointed out by one of the respondents, WSM, while this research was being carried out, she was searching for an advertisement to purchase a house. She was stimulated by the advertisements which offer great discount (7 to 9%) to Bumiputera in buying a house. To her, this kind of advertisement functions as a reminder to her of the Chinese status which is lower.

Besides advertisement, WSM also highlighted politicians' speech, especially ministers and high-ranking government officials, always reminding her of her Chinese identity. For instance, WSM quoted the news report on the then Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Dr. Shafie Mohamed Salleh's speech in UMNO 2004 Annual Assembly. In the speech, Dr. Shafie assured the Malays that the percentage of Malay student was guaranteed to be increased if Malays continued to support him. According to WSM, this kind of speech or political manifesto, whether in newspaper

or on television screen, have caused her to feel insecure about her children's future. As a Chinese in Malaysia, she feels helpless and anxious for her children to enter local public higher education institution in the future. This stimulant has caused WSM to say, "Chinese in Malaysia has developed an ignorant attitude. They only want to take care of themselves and dare not to speak up." She used a Chinese proverb, *ming zhe bao shen* (明哲保身), to illustrate Chinese's attitude and this attitude allows the Malay politicians to give the "sensitive" speech without considering the feeling of the non-Malay.

From the above example, individuals' subjectivity in the society is the result of their negotiation with what happened in the macro level. Inter-ethnic relations, either in the form of harmony or conflict, is dynamic and unfixed. It can be influenced when individual's subjectivity is reconstructed due to the outer stimulants.

### **Binary Oppositional Subjectivity**

In the social world, individual also interacts with other subjects who are defined as opponents. In the context of identity, individual tends to differentiate his identity by comparing himself with the oppositional ethnic group. The ethnocentric attitude and the stereotyping of other ethnic groups, inevitably, influence this form of subjectivity and the ethnic relations, particularly the Chinese-Malay relationship in this context. The untrue generalization on other ethnic groups, such as the Malay, is deemed as real based to their limited experiences in the cross-ethnic interactions.

For example, the respondent, LTL, constructed the binary oppositional subjectivity when he narrated about the holiness of the Malay in their religious practices, and the Malays' ability in managing their lives. For instance, in the aspect of religious practices, LTL compared the Chinese and the Malays and concluded that the Malays are superficial in their religious practices. For LTL, the Malays do not really follow the religious teaching during the fasting month. Based on his experience, he claimed that he always see his Malay factory workers eating in the factory in the daytime. For him, the Malays always like to pretend to be holy Muslims

from the outlook yet they are rotten inside.

Besides this, LTL also spoke from his experience while visiting Terengganu and Kelantan states, which he considered as the “Islamic states”. He claimed that he had seen the Malays eating “wantan” (kind of non-halal Chinese food) in Chinese restaurant. He also criticized the Islamic policy to segregate gender which is useless and irrational. He expressed his confusions by asking how to apply this policy on public transportation such as bus and the station.

From the aspect of daily life, LTL concluded the Malays are lazy people. According to his experience at the working place, during the fasting month, the Malay workers fake illness and excuse themselves from work even absent. LTL said that the Malays’ laziness would cause a big problem to the community in the context of globalization and with the raise of China as an economic powerful state. The Malays who are lazy and could not understand the Mandarin language would not be able to survive and will be left behind. The high rate of unemployment among the Malays is the evidence.

Although LTL’s points of view are largely derived from his selective experience and prejudicial attitude, his attitude and actions are based on these interpretations and have constructed the realities in the social world. With this ethnocentric interpretation, LTL distances himself from the Malays and distrusts the Malays around him. He indicated that he would not leave the factory if there were no Chinese there and he would not leave any important documents, door keys or important task to the non-Chinese in the factory. Therefore, the subjectivities and everyday identity of Chinese do reflect the Chinese-Malay in everyday life.

## **Conclusion**

Using macro perspective alone to examine Chinese identity and Chinese-Malay relationship that embedded in it is not sufficient. As social actors, Malaysian Chinese exhibit their abilities, creativity and reasoning the process of forming their identity and indirectly influences their perceptions and the ways they relate to the Malay in



everyday life. They have their own logical ways and methods in conceptualizing their identity. Moreover, the everyday identity formed by the Malaysian Chinese is fluid, dynamic and situational. Thus, to capture the Chinese-Malay relationship in everyday life, Chinese's subjectivities and everyday identity are important to be examined.

## Notes

- 1 Please refer to Mohd Taib Osman. 1989. *Malay Folk Beliefs*. Kuala Lumpur: DBP. Pg. 9-17; and Wan Hashim Wan Teh. 1995. Teori Migrasi dan Asal-usul Ras Melayu. *Pemikir*. 1: 28-41 to understand the discourse of the origin of the Malays by Sarasins (1898), Hein-Geldern (1932 et al.), Winstedt R. O. (1951), Hall D.G.E (1960) and Mubin Sheppard (1972).
- 2 Regarding the Malays belief system, please refer to Mohd Taib Osman (1989)'s writing on "popular Islam". The complexity of Chinese belief system has been discussed in Tan Chee Beng's concept of "Chinese Religion" in Lee Kam Hing & Tan Chee-Beng (eds.). 2000. *The Chinese in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur. Oxford University Press.
- 3 *Suqiu* (诉求) refers to the "demands" of the Malaysian Chinese Organizations Election Appeals (*Suqiu*) Group which is supported by 2095 *Huatuan* (Chinese associations) in 1999. Although the *Suqiu* document touches on many issues regarding the welfare of different ethnic groups in different levels, the ultimate goal is to urge the government to end the discriminatory practices on Chinese community (Thock 2005: 218-219).
- 4 To understand the abductive approach in detail, please refer to Norman Blaikie (2000)'s book, titled *Designing Social Research: The Logic of Anticipation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- 5 Data presented based on interview with the respondents.
- 6 Internal Security Act (1960) or ISA is a law which is employed by the government to assure peace and security of the country under threaten of Malayan Communist Party (MCP) during 1948-1960. Although MCP today no longer threatens Malaysia, this law is remained to protect the country from any harm that can disturb its stability.

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