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THE HYBRID SPIRIT ANIMATING CHINESE PENTECOSTALS IN MALAYSIA

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD

Program

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Eu Kit Lim

June 2013

Advisor: Jacob N. Kinnard

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Title: THE HYBRID SPIRIT ANIMATING CHINESE PENTECOSTALS IN MALAYSIA

Advisor: Jacob N. Kinnard

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ASBTRACT

This dissertation interrogates the assertion in postcolonial scholarship, especially from the work of Homi Bhabha that the construction and performance of hybrid identities act as a form of resistance for marginalized communities against structures of oppression. While this study supports this assertion, it also critiques how hybridity fails to address issues of unequal power relations. This has led to an uncritical use of hybridity that reproduces the very idea of static identity which its proponents claim to transcend.

Through qualitative study of Chinese members of a Pentecostal church in Malaysia, this study argues that church members engage in “unequal belonging” where they privilege certain elements of their identities over others. In concert with Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptions of *habitus*, field, and capital, unequal belonging highlights how hybridity fails to capture the intersecting and competing loyalties, strategies, and complexities of identity formation on a contextual level. Unequal belonging challenges postcolonial scholars to locate the subtle workings of power and privilege that manifest even among marginalized communities.

The study first situates the Chinese through an analysis of the historical legacy of British colonialism that has structured the country’s current socio-political configuration along bounded categories of identification. The *habitus* constrains church members to accept certain Chinese ethnic markers as “givens.” Although they face continuous marginalization, interviewee data demonstrates that church members negotiate their

Chineseness and construct a “Modern Chinese” ethnic identity as a strategic move away from Chinese stereotypes. Moreover, conversion to Christianity affords church members access to cultural capital. Yet, it is limited and unequal capital. In particular, the “Chinese Chinese,” who church members have demarcated as backward and traditional, are unable to gain access to this capital because they lack fluency in English and knowledge in modern, westernized worldviews.

Unequal belonging nuances monolithic conceptions of hybridity. It demonstrates how church members’ privilege of Christianity over Chineseness exposes the complex processes of power and privilege that makes westernized-English-speaking Chinese Christians culturally “higher” than non-English-speaking, non-Christian, Chinese. This study provides significant contribution to the complex aspect of hybridity where it is both a site of resistance and oppression.

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Last but not least, I thank my parents, Albert and Ann Lim, for their love, support, and patience as they waited and anguished for eight long years to see their son graduate with a Ph.D. degree. It is to them that I am dedicating this dissertation.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: POSTCOLONIALISM AND HYBRIDITY

(IN)ACTION

My grandfather had a deadbeat father. When he was six, his father collapsed and died after playing mahjong and consuming alcohol for two consecutive days. My great grandmother had enough. The Chinese gods were of no use to her; they offered no assistance for her troubles. Now a widow, she decided to “switch sides,” embraced Christianity, and started attending the local Chinese Methodist church. A devoted Christian, she never missed Sunday worship despite engaging in excessive games of mahjong six days a week. A heavy smoker, she ultimately contracted mouth cancer and passed away at the age of 63. She was buried in a Christian cemetery in her hometown, far away from her deceased husband who was interred in a Chinese cemetery. Already, my grandfather was exposed to two different sets of identities and worldviews.

My grandfather attended high school operated by Methodist missionaries. A Chinese pastor, who was also his school teacher, befriended him. The pastor shared with him the Gospel and evangelized him. His efforts appeared fruitful as my grandfather agreed to be baptized as a Christian. However, on the morning of his baptism, he was nowhere to be found. Baffled by this, his teacher confronted him and asked why he shied away from taking the step of obedience to follow Jesus Christ. My grandfather explained that by becoming a Christian, he would be dishonoring his late father who was

Buddhist/ practitioner of Chinese religious traditions. Who would take care of his grave once he becomes a Christian? Who would observe Qing Ming and honor his ancestors once he embraced Christianity?

After that incident, my grandfather would describe himself as a “free thinker” throughout his adult life. He had some conception of a divine being, but had not given it much thought. It was not until late in his life that he finally converted to Christianity at his son’s urging. This time, another pastor convinced him that one should honor the ancestors while they are still alive and that ancestor veneration was pointless because they are already dead. They are long gone and no longer around in this world. Satisfied with this explanation, my grandfather was finally baptized and converted to Christianity.

I still recall those days when I visited my grandfather after his conversion to Christianity. While he would periodically attend church services and pray to Jesus, he still made frequent visits to his father and mother’s graves annually during Qing Ming. He died a few years later and had a Christian funeral. Today, the church where he attended in the last years of his life conducts yearly memorial services for its deceased parishioners, and his name is called out and recognized.

What are we to make of this narrative? Perhaps we can speculate that my grandfather simply wanted to satisfy his son’s wishes. Conversion from one religious tradition to another cannot be as simple as a story of a stubborn old man finally seeing the light and turning to the “true” faith. Nor can we describe this as my grandfather’s strategy to “cover the bases” and have “insurance” for the afterlife. Certainly, these are interesting discussion topics in their own way, but I am more interested in the story of a man

struggling to come to terms with his own identity before finally settling down to what appears to be a hybridized Chinese Christian identity. Conversion to another religious tradition entails a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding to another different grounding.

Yet, my grandfather's story shows that conversion does not necessitate a complete jettisoning of one identity in favor of another. These are complicated and important questions that require thoughtful examination and analysis beyond the rhetoric of "what's in" and "what's out." My grandfather's day to day life showed that he was simultaneously Chinese and Christian by being not quite one or the other. While his life story is not the sole impulse of this project, my interests in religion, identity, and postcoloniality converge together to pursue this research interest.

The Future is Hybrid? Locating the Dissertation

This dissertation focuses on how Chinese Christians in Malaysia construct their identities, how they express their identities in their daily lives, and how they connect them to the broader socio-economic, political and cultural context. What goes through a person's thought process when they adopt and privilege one worldview over the other? How do multiple identities affect the way people conceive themselves as both Chinese and Christian as they negotiate and reinterpret their ethnic, cultural, and religious traditions? Why is one religious and/or cultural system privileged over the other? How do these communities stand to benefit by adopting such identity formations? More importantly, do these hybrid identities serve as a site of power and/or resistance?

From its early biological association with notions of impurity to a positive reclamation in the humanities, the concept of hybridity is associated with the mixing of identities in instances of cultural contacts and exchanges. In addition, hybridity captures the ambiguous state of the globalized world with the fracturing and constant shifting of identities in an increasingly multicultural and intertwined world. No longer seen as a stable category, identities are negotiated, multiple, and in a constant state of flux that is dependent on social contexts. In postcolonial studies, hybridity functions as a strategy for disrupting exclusionist and oppression-based essentialist notions of a pure identity. A “camouflage” which complicates and muddles essentialist constructions of identity, it is a “third space” inhabited by the marginalized to expose and disrupt the ambivalence of colonial rule.¹ The presence of the hybrid interrupts and destabilizes the violence inherent in dominant discourses and structures of oppression. In other words, hybridity, when performed, acts as a site of resistance.

I want to interrogate the claim that hybridity acts as a resistance strategy in disrupting essentialist and oppressive power structures among marginalized and minority communities. While I fundamentally support the assertion that hybrid identities are fluid,

¹ Homi Bhabha is the biggest proponent of this idea, especially in postcolonial studies. Since the publication of, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), hybridity has taken off and is widely discussed in various academic disciplines. Of course, Bhabha is also picking up hybridity from earlier works and gave a positive treatment of it. For some examples of works from other scholars and novelists writing on (and critiqued) hybridity, see V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Avtar Brah and Annie Coombes, eds., *Hybridity and its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Joel Kuortti, and Jopi Nyman, eds., *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); Keri Iyall Smith, and Patricia Leavy, eds., *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Sten Putz Moslund, *Migration Literature and Hybridity: The Different Speeds of Transcultural Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and Amar Acheraoui, *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). I will engage Bhabha and his conception of hybridity later in this work.

negotiated, and constructed, these “qualifiers” have become so familiar and almost a given that Rogers Brubaker call them “clichéd constructivism... lea[ving] us with a term so infinitely elastic as to be incapable of performing serious analytical work.”²

Brubaker’s observation highlights how identity discourse is valorized along two poles – either identity is static and stable or it is constructed and fluid.³ The study of hybrid identities is also notorious for its heavy and abstract theorizing especially within postcolonial scholarship. Further, very few postcolonial scholars have analyzed how hybridized identities manifest on the ground.

Given these shortcomings, I argue in this dissertation that hybridity fails to highlight and address issues of unequal power relations. I further contend that hybrid identities, as a strategy for resistance, is not mono-directional (always emerging from the bottom-up), nor is it clearly liberative. Through an examination of a Chinese-majority Pentecostal Church in Malaysia, I argue that they engage in what I call “unequal belonging” where they privilege certain elements of their identities over others.⁴ In this case, it is their Christian identities that take precedence over their ethnic Chinese identities. Through this unequal belonging, I demonstrate how dominance covertly (or

² Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 38.

³ In addition to the aforementioned Brubaker text, some examples of works addressing the pervasiveness of binary thinking within identity studies include Veret Amid, and Nigel Rapport, eds., *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); Mervyn F. Bendle, “The Crisis of Identity in High Modernity,” in *The British Journal of Sociology* 53, no.1 (2003): 1-18; and Nina Glick Schiller, “Situating Identities: Towards an Identities Studies Without Binaries of Difference,” in *Identities: Global Studies in Popular Culture and Power* 19, no.4 (2012): 520-532.

⁴ Although this concept has its similarities with “hierarchy,” my use of unequal belonging is intentional and more complex. While “hierarchy” alludes to simplistic a “top-down” relationship, usually between the oppressor and the oppressed, unequal belonging addresses the non-vertical relationship within marginalized groups. This concept points toward a more layered and horizontal working of privilege and power that are inherent within marginalized groups.

overtly) masks itself through fluid and dynamic constructions of hybrid identities. My project hopes to challenge scholars to locate some of the more subtle workings of power and hegemony entrenched even among marginalized communities. Hybridity's failure to address issues of unequal power relations often lead us to uncritically celebrate hybridity as sites of resistance, thus reproducing the very idea of pure and static identities which hybridity claims to transcend. Hybridity has become a monolithic "one size fits all" category and affords little purchase in our analysis of identity formation.

As the material grounding for my study, Chinese Pentecostal Christians in Malaysia presents a compelling social context in examining hybridity's claims and adds an important dimension to the larger issue of identity formation within the comparative context of postcoloniality and religion.⁵ A former British colonial territory, Malaysia is a developing nation with a diverse population consisting of various ethnic and religious groups. However, ethnic and class tensions between dominant Malays and ethnic minority groups undergird the nation's population. The Chinese minority lives in a precarious environment where dominant Malays constantly stigmatize them as members of the *kaum pendatang* (or *pendatang*), a pejorative term literally translated as "immigrant group."

In addition, Christianity, in particular Pentecostal Christianity, is a rapidly growing religious sect in Malaysia, bolstered by many urban Chinese converts. Yet, conversion to Christianity usually means that they face double discrimination. The dominant Malay Muslims distrust Christians because of the proselytizing nature of the

⁵ Throughout this dissertation, I will be using the terms "identity formation" and "identity construction" interchangeably.

religion. Chinese Christians in Malaysia face very real political, ethnic, cultural, and religious discrimination.⁶ Despite this, they remain economically viable and successful, often “outperforming” the Malays and other ethnic groups.

The Chinese Malaysian context provides a rich resource for my project in examining the resistive potential of hybridity. I show that the Chinese Malaysian context highlights the danger of uncritically associating the word “hybridity” with subversion and resistance. As I shall also demonstrate in this dissertation, Chinese Malaysians are simultaneously oppressed and privileged. To borrow Brubaker’s term again, such “clichéd constructivism” fails to see the complexities of unequal power relationships that manifests within the interstitial spaces and hybrid identities.

This dissertation employs an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together diverse fields in order to explore the lives of Malaysian Pentecostal Chinese. I locate my research at the intersections of postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, and religious studies since there are multiple dynamics that are present in the lives of Malaysian Pentecostal Chinese as they negotiate their ethnic and religious identities. Given this context, I delineate the complex workings of race and ethnicity, social standing, and religion, and show how the Chinese are simultaneously resisting as well as perpetuating the dominant structures in

⁶ To be sure, there are many other minority groups in Malaysia. However, it is generally recognized among Malaysians that Indians (from Southern India) and Chinese are the primary minority groups in the country. The dominant group, the Malays view themselves as the “indigenous” and “original” people in the country and received the designation of *bumiputra* (translated as “sons of the soil”) by the ruling government. See for example, Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002); and Tan Tai Yong, *Creating “Greater Malaysia:” Decolonization and the Politics of Merger* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008). For other works that critique the monolithic construction of the Malay “race,” see Joel Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006); and David C.L. Lim, ed., *Overcoming Passion for Race in Malaysia Cultural Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

Malaysia. I take Chandra Mohanty's words seriously as she comments on the issue of pluralism and difference in ethnic and identity construction:

The challenge of race resides in a fundamental reconceptualization of our categories of analysis so that differences can be historically specified and understood as part of larger political processes and systems. The central issue, then, is not one of merely acknowledging difference; rather, the more difficult question concerns the kind of difference that is acknowledged and engaged. Difference seen as benign variation (diversity), for instance, rather than as conflict, struggle, or the threat of disruption, bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious, empty pluralism.⁷

Adhering to Mohanty's words, my dissertation intends to not only be a straightforward descriptive project on identity construction, but also a rigorous analysis on the utility of the identities constructed by Malaysian Pentecostal Chinese.

Many scholarly writings on Christianity in Malaysia focus primarily on issues of theology, church history, and missiology. This dissertation hopes to provide a fresh perspective on a topic that is hardly addressed in Malaysia. I am engaging in a project that addresses identity formation as it locates itself in postcolonial discourse, and takes into account the content of Christian beliefs and doctrine as an important element in the sociopolitical formation Chinese Malaysian identities.

The Field of Postcolonial Studies and the Question of Hybrid Identities

Because hybridity is such an important category in postcolonial studies, I am locating the majority of my work within the confines of this discipline. Since its early emergence in the 1950s, postcolonial studies have expanded from writings concerning anti-colonial struggles (although this is still one of its main objectives), to categories

⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s," in *Cultural Critique* 14 (1989): 181.

involving issues of representation, states of being, gender relations, reading strategies, and identity construction.

A common observation of postcolonial studies is that it lacks coherence in terms of methodology and a point of origin due to its inter-disciplinary nature. Far from being a unified discipline, postcolonial studies is associated with various established disciplines such as history, anthropology, English, and literary studies. As a consequence, there is a vast corpus of work emerged within the rubric of postcolonialism in the humanities. The diffused nature of postcolonial studies also coincides with the conditions of an increasingly globalized, postmodern, and fractured world where issues of origins, power, hegemony, and agency are highly scrutinized in all areas of human society. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight some of the developments and divergences which have occurred in the development of the discipline. I should mention however, that I do not intend to conduct a thorough historical review of the entire field of postcolonial studies. Rather, I want to review the relevant literature that directly pertains to identity construction to lay the grounding and context of my own research context.

At its core, postcolonial studies is dedicated to interrogating and destabilizing colonial structures and categories. It is also an attempt to recover voices from the margins of dominant discourse. According to Leela Gandhi, postcolonial studies provides a “theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath... devoted to... revisiting, remembering, and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past.”⁸ Though Gandhi alludes to a colonial “past” or aftermath (hence, the prefix “post”), however,

⁸ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4.

colonialism is still alive and well, albeit in a different manifestation. Stuart Hall's essay, "When was the 'Post-colonial?' Thinking at the Limit," attempts to interrogate this ambiguous term. Amidst the politics of inclusion, that is, who gets to be "in" the postcolonial group, and questions of origin and the utility of the prefix "post," Hall insists that it at least provides us with certain guidelines, if not some utilitarian value.⁹

Like Gandhi, Hall agrees that the prefix "post" should not denote an end of colonialism. Rather, we must remain suspicious of such claims. There is nothing celebratory about the postcolonial condition at all. While it may be true that the colonial powers have packed their belongings and returned to their respective home countries, the structures and ways of thinking that were put in place are still very much intact in the formerly colonized and newly independent nations. Thus, we must be skeptical of claims

⁹ Stuart Hall, "When was 'the Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit," in *The Post-Colonial Question*, edited by Iain Chambers, and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 246. As I have mentioned earlier, there is no single unified field in postcolonial studies. Therefore, to provide a universalized definition of the "who," "when" and "what" of postcolonialism would be difficult. However, we can agree on the similarities regarding its genesis, theoretical orientation, and purpose. For a historical overview of the field, see, in addition to Gandhi's superb *Postcolonial Theory*, Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997); Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Peter Childs, and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997); and Michael Syrotinski, *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial: At the Limits of Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007). There are also many published readers and anthologies mapping the emergence, thematic concerns, and selections of essential readings from prominent postcolonial scholars. See for example, Patrick Williams, and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Gaurav Desai, and Supriya Nair, eds., *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005). Finally, various scholars have recently put together an enormous 20-volume book ongoing series on postcolonialism and its various theoretical concerns. Aptly titled *Postcolonial Studies* and published by Peter Lang Press, this book series examines various facets of the colonial legacy, nationalism, issues of representation and resistance, diaspora, displacement and migratory identities, and cultural hybridity across geographical regions and disciplinary approaches. I should also mention that recent trends in postcolonial scholarship involve moving beyond the boundary of Anglophone and Francophone literature, and toward a more comparative approach by investigating links between a range of Anglophone, Francophone, Caribbean, Latin American and Dutch contexts. See for example, Michelle Keown, David Murphy and James Procter, eds., *Comparing Postcolonial Diasporas* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Michael Niblett, and Kerstin Oloff, eds., *Perspectives on the 'Other America': Comparative Approaches to Caribbean and Latin American Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).

made by those who proclaim that the period of freedom has finally come for the colonized, and perhaps more insidiously, the proclamation that there is *one* single solution to resist colonial domination.

Hall also contends that the term “postcolonial” can help us characterize the shift in global relations which marks the uneven transition from the age of empires to the post-independent/post-decolonization era. Postcolonialism as an academic discipline helps us identify the new relations and dispositions of power with the emergence of new global relations and order.¹⁰ Thus, Hall succinctly states that the “post” in post-colonialism denotes going beyond colonialism.¹¹ This shift in global relations is what postcolonial scholars are attempting to examine as they continue to struggle in constructing new strategies in resisting this new form of colonialism.

Given the globalized characteristic of the world, identities are becoming more complex. The shift in global relations has also produced a hybridization of cultures and identities through a reflexive relationship between local and global. These constructed identities are neither assimilated nor altered. Instead, they are a fusion of interactions and elements of both the local and global to create a new hybrid identity.¹² The hybrid, once a derogatory word used to signify impurity and contamination, has found new life in postcolonial studies. Hybridized identities are common in postcolonial communities, and

¹⁰ Ibid., 256-257. Euro-Western thought and cultural norms continue to permeate across postcolonial nations and communities even after the era of physical imperialism is long gone. In response, postcolonial scholars charged that far from being the disseminator of knowledge, law and order, and culture, Europe should be considered simply as one of many cultural regions. In effect, it is an attempt towards “provincializing” and delinking Euro-West thought as the operative norm across the globe. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Ibid., 254.

¹² Keri E. Iyall Smith, “Hybrid Identities: Theoretical Examinations,” in *Hybrid Identities*, 3.

many postcolonial scholars have explored this concept extensively. Hybridity becomes an asset because of its creative ability to traverse across boundaries and understanding both the local and global. It creates an advantageous space for cultural creativity and imagination.¹³ Yet, we must not stop at the descriptive and prescriptive aspect of hybridity, but rather analyze *how* hybridity is or is not useful for different communities. I must also note that as one of the most colonized regions of the world, Southeast Asia does not figure significantly in the ever expanding corpus of postcolonial literature.¹⁴ For this reason, Malaysia provides an excellent case study against hybridity's purported claims.

Homi Bhabha, the main theorist on hybridity, is most famous for articulating and demonstrating resistance strategies that marginalized communities employ within the interstices of a structure that provides little to no room for such possibilities. In order to examine Bhabha's claims of hybridity, I will first provide a brief genealogy of hybridity within the field of postcolonial studies.¹⁵ I begin by exploring the "anti-colonial" writings of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire as they were interested in the question of pan-African black identity. More importantly, they begin to articulate the fracturing of identities

¹³ See for example, Ming-Cheng Lo, *Doctors Within Borders: Profession, Ethnicity, and Modernity in Colonial Taiwan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Lo's analysis of Taiwanese doctors during the Japanese Occupation challenges the colonizer/colonized dichotomy and demonstrates how the doctors negotiate their "in-betweenness" and create spaces to critique Japanese domination.

¹⁴ A close examination of various postcolonial texts reveals a dearth of postcolonial analysis in the Southeast Asian region. "Classic" postcolonial studies texts are predominantly produced from the Middle Eastern, African, and sub-Indian continents. Even Europe and Australia have received more treatment than Southeast Asia. So, even as postcolonial scholarship is heading more towards a comparative model, Southeast Asia continues to be neglected for various reasons such as ambivalence towards colonialism as an "oppressive force," and the rise of multi-national capitalist economics. See Chua Beng Huat, "Southeast Asia in Postcolonial Studies: An Introduction," in *Postcolonial Studies* 11, no.3 (2008): 231-240.

¹⁵ Again, this is not a comprehensive literature review of the field itself. As I have already suggested some texts for a good comprehensive review of the field, at this juncture, I will touch on some key theorists that I have identified as hybridity's academic predecessors.

where the colonized person is trapped in between two worlds. I then explain hybridity's ascension to the forefront of postcolonial studies which owes its start with the "professionalization" of the discipline, represented by Edward Said. How one claims to be who they are, and if one possesses the agency to deploy such hybrid identities are important questions to consider. To address the issues of representation and agency, I shall also explore the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Analyzing Homi Bhabha's works, I draw attention to the issue of identity, and how constructions of identity have functioned as a way of resistance and political mobilization. Finally, I highlight the innovations, critiques, and tensions that exist within the discipline.

The Anti-colonials

The ensuing instability following the end of World War II in Europe propelled a way for its colonies to assert their autonomy against their masters. The politics of revolution became the main characteristic among postcolonial writing in 1950s as scholars and activists from Northern Africa and the Caribbean called for a break from Euro-Western ways of being. Two scholar/activists, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, are the best representatives of this "anti-colonial" phase of postcolonialism.¹⁶ They have conceptualized colonialism as a totalizing force of violence and brutality. Only an instance of total revolution could eradicate it. In this case, a negative force (colonialism) can only be countered by a positive one (revolution). Amidst the rhetoric of total

¹⁶ Not to be forgotten are other prominent anti-colonial figures such as Chinua Achebe, Leopold Senghor, Albert Memmi, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. For the sake of brevity, I will not be exploring their works and contributions to the anti-colonial cause.

revolution, early postcolonial scholars are interested in understanding what it means to straddle a colonized mentality with an emerging “postcolonial” identity.

Aimé Césaire, a Martinique scholar, poet, and political activist, wrote his seminal work, *Discourse on Colonialism* in which he explores the hypocrisy implicit in western civilizations along with the bankrupt notions of “progress” and “civilization.”¹⁷ Written at the height of the anti-colonial fervor in the 1950s, *Discourse* captures the spirit of revolution in a post-World War II environment where European imperialism was on the decline. Césaire argues that colonization and civilization are, by definition, incommensurable. Highly influenced by Marxist theory, Césaire attempts to move beyond the narrative of class struggle between bourgeois and proletariats to the one between colonizer and colonized. He insists that the anti-colonial struggle supersedes the proletarian revolution as the fundamental historical movement of the period.¹⁸ This means that the coming revolution will not be defined in terms of capitalism versus socialism but by the complete overthrow of the bourgeois and racist colonial systems that redraw new boundaries for a new world.

For Césaire, colonialism is “neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project

¹⁷ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York, NY: Monthly Press Review, 2000), 32.

¹⁸ We should not be too quick to condemn Césaire for “bastardizing” Marxist theory to serve his anti-colonial fervor. On the contrary, he was a longstanding member of the French Communist Party, and looked toward the Soviet Union as a model for a utopian society. But his relationship with Marxism and communism was not without any conflict. When the Soviet Union suppressed the Hungarian uprising in 1956, he grew disillusioned with the communist movement and ultimately resigned from the Party. Unlike his white Marxist counterparts, Césaire could not separate the issue of class from the problem of race. He argues in *Discourse*, that the communists “acted like abstract Communists” in their failure to address the “Negro problem.” (*Discourse*, 85) On the other hand, the colonized, in their concrete experience of racism, are unable to overlook the race question. Césaire believes that there needs to be an ongoing effort to reform and “complete” Marxist theory.

undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law.”¹⁹

Rather, “the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force.”²⁰ This is not surprising since Europe, having experienced the horrors of two world wars and Nazism in the early twentieth century, would only perpetuate a similar modality in its colonies. The difference however, is while Nazism was condemned, colonialism was tolerated because it was directed towards non-Europeans. Césaire points out that both colonialism and Nazism stem from the same ideology that privileges one race over the other. He equates the process of colonization as “thingification.”²¹

Additionally, Césaire states that colonialism is toxic to both the colonized and the colonizer, which he calls the “boomerang effect.” The colonized individual is dehumanized and reduced to an instrument of production to serve the purpose of the colonizer. As a result of colonialism, indigenous peoples also lost their culture. In addition, colonialism works to “decivilize” the colonizer. Colonization, states Césaire:

dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him [sic] who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him [sic] like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself [sic] into an animal.²²

As a way out of this entrapment, Césaire calls on colonized peoples to overthrow the colonizer’s ideology of progress that is built on violence, destruction, and genocide.

¹⁹ Césaire, *Discourse*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²² *Ibid.*, 41.

Further, it is equally necessary to decolonize one's minds as well as society. Failure to do so would condemn both Europe and its colonies.

Césaire belongs to a group of literary and intellectual figures that advocate the idea of Négritude. From its early development in the 1930s, Négritude rejects French colonialism in favor of a common black identity and the self-affirmation of the black individual.²³ They believed that the shared cultural heritage among blacks around the globe would create an effective tool in fighting against the French. By the time Césaire became active in the anti-colonial movement, Négritude as a political movement had come full circle. Césaire's view of Négritude is not only concerned with the political liberation of blacks, but also with the creation of a positive black social identity.²⁴

²³ Here, I must mention another important figure among the African anti-colonial movement, Leopold Senghor. A close friend of Césaire, Senghor is a big proponent of Négritude. He believes that at the heart of every black person lies an essence and shared African attribute. Senghor argues that the Négritude mentality is diametrically opposed to Euro-Western ways of thought. Whereas Euro-Western thought is objective and is based on separation conflict, Négritude is based on unity and balance. We may think that this is simplistic and essentialistic by today's standards. However, we must remember that the figure of the "primitive" black person is a construction of European colonialism. In effect, European colonialism had systematically and effectively wiped out all traces of African historical and intellectual achievements. This provided the rationale for Euro-Western colonial projects around the world. Négritude rejects the idea that black identity is inferior to the "white man" and strives to alter the negative values attached to African and the black individual. Thus, for Senghor, Négritude acts as an effective counter-myth or counter-reading of traditional European stereotypes with aims of valorizing and celebrating the African identity. For more information, see Leopold Senghor, "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, 27-35; Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); and Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

²⁴ To be sure, there are many expressions of Négritude, and I must acknowledge the movement's plurality. Beginning with the 1930s, Négritude can be interpreted along its thematic orientations. For example, one could conceptualize Négritude as an aesthetic movement or an epistemological orientation. Similar to Césaire's view, here I am referring to Négritude as a political/revolutionary movement. For more information on the various conceptions of Négritude, and Césaire's interpretation of it, see A. James Arnold, *Modernism and Négritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Janis Pallister, *Aimé Césaire* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Gregson Davis, *Aimé Césaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Reiland Rabaka, *Africana Critical Theory: Reconstructing the Black Radical Tradition from W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James to Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).

Another seminal figure and fellow Martiniquean, Frantz Fanon, echoed Césaire's critique of European civilization and colonial racism in *Discourse*. With the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks* and coupled by the full force of the Négritude movement, Fanon's work examines colonialism's psychic, cultural and social damages toward the colonized. A psychiatrist by training, Fanon employs psychoanalytic modes of analysis and asserts that colonialism is based on racist worldviews. In addition, the concept of whiteness relies on the negation of the black subject. Neither one can exist without the other. So, if the white colonizer is progressive, rational and civilized, the black subject is backward, irrational and uncivilized. The structure of colonialism privileges whites and generates harmful psychological constructs that blind the black person to his subjection to a universalized/idealized white norm, and thus alienating his own consciousness.²⁵

Due to the negative and inferior stigmatization of the black subject, colonized blacks desperately try to escape this predicament. For example, they would attempt to marry a white person in order to be more "white," or they would reject their inherent inferiority and embrace white culture. The black person dons a white "mask" in order to be more like their white masters. Yet, because the structure of colonialism only privileges the white colonizer, they can never truly fit in to white society. Further, by donning the white mask, the black person is rejecting his own self-identity and ultimately alienating himself, with disastrous results. *Black Skin* represents Fanon's theorizing of radical anti-

²⁵ My use of the male gender pronoun is intentional. I am simply reporting and stating the gist of Fanon's arguments about the psychic imprisonment of the black mind, more specifically, the black man's mind. A product of his time, Fanon did not address the colonial experience of women of color, which was of course vastly different from men. Feminist scholars have critiqued Fanon's omission and inattention to women of color. For more information, see Rey Chow, "The Politics of Admittance: Female Sexual Agency, Miscegenation, and the Formation of Community in Frantz Fanon," in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Anthony Alessandrini (New York: Routledge, 1999), 35-58; and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

colonial and anti-racist humanism that rejects the assimilationist model of white supremacy. While Fanon's analysis of the black psyche takes many cues from psychoanalysis, he also moves beyond the confines of psychology. He articulates how colonized peoples can recuperate a sense of identity and cultural affiliation independent of the racist project of an imperializing dominant culture. He states that the "effective disalienation of the black man [sic] entails a recognition of social and economic realities."²⁶ Examinations on individual neurosis may be beneficial, but this is no substitute for an analysis of social situations. He articulates this sentiment further in his next book.

In his follow-up book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon incorporates what he has written in *Black Skin* and produces a revolutionary manifesto similar to *Discourse on Colonialism*. For Fanon, the devastation of the black mind due to their perceived inferiority and the destruction of colonized societies (in this case, French-occupied Algeria) can only be countered through the use of violence. For Fanon, violence is inherent in the act of decolonization and liberation movements. He contends that colonial society is structured in a Manichean fashion where good is pitted against evil; black against white; rich against poor; and colonizer against colonized. Since colonialism came about through violence, violence is the only language that colonialism understands and capable of responding back. He writes, "Colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence."²⁷ It is a purifying force that wipes the slate clean of

²⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 10-11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

any colonial past. Decolonization thus cleaves away this dichotomous structure that would usher a complete overhaul of the socio-political system. By starting things over from the ground up, Fanon believes that every aspect of society, from the lowest to the highest, would benefit from a new system that is free from European influence.

Fanon blames the failings of nationalism on the “intellectual laziness of the middle class.”²⁸ These nationalist elites came into power only insofar as they seek to replicate the structures set in place by the outgoing colonizers. They only wish to gain access to the wealth and social status that had previously been commandeered by the colonists.²⁹ Fanon faults the national elites for their unwillingness to alter the old colonial system and improve the situation that would benefit all aspects of colonial society. Further, reformist ideals have no place in Fanon’s schema. Acts of negotiation and peaceful handovers from colonial to independent governments are nothing but facades that serve to perpetuate the colonial structures that are already put in place. Indeed, the native elites are in power only insofar as it seeks to replicate the bourgeois structures of the “mother country” that sustains colonial rule. Fanon believes that the opportunistic native elites are surveying and controlling the colonized masses to the same extent as the colonials that they have displaced.

To this end, Fanon believes that peasants and the most disenfranchised (i.e. the wretched of the earth) constitute the most revolutionary group and are the only ones qualified to lead the charge against colonialism. This is because they are suspicious of the elite native nationalists’ promises of independence and reforms. Fanon’s answer to the

²⁸ Ibid., 149.

²⁹ Ibid., 53.

problem of colonialism is the complete overthrow of European presence from Africa. This includes not only expelling European presence from the colonies, but eradicating all forms of European political and social structures and ways of being. The European conception of humanity and universality should make way for a new way of being, one that taps into a localized context and tradition as a resource. Only then will the colonized be truly free from European domination.

From this brief exploration of the anti-colonials, we now have a clearer sense of postcolonialism's beginnings.³⁰ Early postcolonial theorists are concerned with the ill effects that colonialism have on colonized peoples and they theorized that colonialism needs to be eradicated in its entirety. Anti-colonials support embracing localized traditions as a way to create a more just order. While they are interested and engaged in political and economic liberation, they are also aware of the psychological trauma that colonialism inflicts on identity formation among colonized peoples. Thus, they are dedicated to rescuing the "black subject" from destitute and self-hate, and toward creating a counter-narrative against accepted colonial norms.

By the end of the 1960s, the enthusiastic hope of revolution and decolonization had waned. Fanon and Césaire's call to remake an alternative and inclusive political solidarity had failed. But we need not dismiss their contributions as wrong, outdated or unsophisticated for what Fanon and Césaire bring to postcolonial scholarship has been

³⁰ This is still a contested assertion. As we recall from Stuart Hall's article, the term "post" in postcolonialism remains unclear and elusive to define. Meanwhile, Native American scholars would argue that the "post" in colonialism has not arrived yet, and that anticolonial sentiments have been around since Columbus set foot on the North American continent. For more information, see Arnold Krupat, "Postcolonialism, Ideology and Native American Literature," in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, edited by Amritjit Singh, and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 73-94; and George "Tink" Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

invaluable, and there is still much utility in their scholarship even as the state of global relations has changed since the 1950s.³¹ While the era of physical colonization may be (more or less) over, colonial structures continue to perpetuate with the shift in global relations and new complex re-alignment of power dispositions in the world. This calls for new ways of theorizing postcolonialism. Here, we see an expansion of Fanon and Césaire's anti-colonial writings into more complex theorizing on cultural discourses dealing primarily with issues of identity, gender, language, power relations, and difference.³² The anti-colonials' observations on the fracturing psyche of the colonized

³¹ David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* observes that "anticolonialism has been a classic instance of modern longing for total revolution." (*Conscripts*, 6) In addition, he associates anticolonialism as "traditional" dreams of utopia and political emancipation that are no longer useful in light of the utter failure of anti-colonial movements in the 1950s. See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Yet, anti-colonial writings continue to receive scholarly treatment, despite their outdatedness. In particular, Fanon continues to garner substantial interest from activists, educators, politicians, and scholars today. For instance, Paolo Freire engages Fanon in his discussion on false liberation in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1968. Though echoing Fanon's distrust of the native elite, Freire emphasizes that liberative education should not simply be about a turning of the tables. Rather, Freire insists that an essential component to social liberation entails the incorporation of all (including peasants) into the movement. Elsewhere, scholars such as Nigel Gibson continue to "rescue" Fanon from the "neutering effects" of contemporary postcolonial discourse. As the newly independent nations of Africa became victims to precisely the sort of false decolonization that Fanon had warned against, Gibson contends that this "post-independence" disenfranchisement has transformed Fanon into a revered and important thinker, but nonetheless "naïve." In his article, "Is Fanon Relevant? Toward an Alternative Foreword to 'The Damned of the Earth,'" Gibson acknowledges Fanon's "datedness" while simultaneously trying to recover Fanon's radical politics by examining contemporary social movements that would resonate with Fanon's idea of the "wretched." For other examples of contemporary treatments on Fanon and his works, see Emmanuel Hansen, *Frantz Fanon: Social and Political Thought* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977); Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Nigel C. Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003); Adele Jinadu, *Fanon: In Search of the African Revolution* (London: Kegan Paul, 2003); Nigel C. Gibson, "Is Fanon Relevant? Toward an Alternative Foreword to 'The Damned of the Earth,'" in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5 (1997): 33-44; Reiland Rabaka, *Forms of Fanonism: Frantz Fanon's Critical Theory and the Dialectics of Decolonization* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010); and Nigel C. Gibson, ed., *Living Fanon: Global Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

³² Bhabha's theorizing of hybridity owes much of its influence from the writings of the anti-colonials. Bhabha has published numerous articles addressing Fanon's contribution to postcolonialism and his influence on Bhabha's own work. This speaks volumes to his indebtedness to anti-colonial scholarship. Bhabha's articles have been republished as introductions and new prefaces to the newest editions of Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*. See for example, Homi Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon," in *New Formations* 1(1987): 118-135. There is also an entire chapter in his *The*

person have become a launching point in examining how people who live within and in-between the (post)colonial world construct their identities.

Even though Fanon and Césaire may seem passé by today's standards, there is still much utility in their theoretical analyses, especially as related to the disenfranchisement of marginalized communities within newly independent nations. In my research context, Malaysians are especially proud of the fact that they did not have to engage in a bloody war against their colonial masters to achieve independence. Our history books unequivocally celebrate the skillful maneuvering of a select few elite men in negotiating a peaceful transition from British rule to self-governance. Yet, as Fanon and Césaire have shown us, peaceful transitions do not weed out the structures of colonialism. If anything, these structures continue to perpetuate under a new regime now led by nationalist elites. Specifically, postcolonial Malaysia continues to be haunted by the “divide and rule” policy. The current ruling government, having absorbed and internalized the racist stereotypes from the British long after they have left, continues to deploy these essentialized identities as a way to consolidate their power. In a society where ethnic prejudice thrives in politics, communities, institutions and popular culture, it is imperative to first understand how oppression is internalized and reproduced before analyzing the resistance strategies forged among marginalized communities in Malaysia.

Location of Culture dedicated to the work of Fanon and identity. See “Chapter 2: Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative,” in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 57-93.

The “Professionalization” of Postcolonial Studies: Said, Bhabha, and Spivak

Locating agency among the oppressed can be a difficult task. With the collapse of the anti-colonial movement and the consolidation and restructuring of neo-colonial structures around the globe, advocating total revolution ala Fanon or Césaire may not be a viable option. Instead, contemporary postcolonial studies is interested in examining and locating of the gaps and fault lines in colonial structures in order to locate avenues and spaces where the marginalized could utilize as a site of resistance.

In 1979, Palestinian cultural critic Edward Said published his book *Orientalism*, heralding the beginning of “postcolonial studies” as an academic field of study. Drawing on Foucauldian theories of power and knowledge, Said sought to uncover the creation and control of the “Oriental” figure by western scholars throughout the modern era. From the time Napoleon stepped foot in Egypt in the late 1700s, Said argues that the West has actively engaged in writing, collecting and representing the Orient (the Middle East) and constructing the “Other.”³³ Subsequent academic writings from England, France, and most recently, the United States have produced studies that effectively distorted the

³³ To be sure, *Orientalism* is not the first work to make this connection. The critique of western representation of the Orient stretches back as far as the 18th century with chronicler Abd-al-Rahman al-Jabarti’s observation that Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 was as much an epistemological as a military conquest. For more information, see Abd-al-Rahman Jabarati, *Napoleon in Egypt: Al-Jabarti’s Chronicle of the French Occupation, 1798*, trans. Shmuel Moreh (Princeton: M. Wiener Publishers, 1993). See also Anwar Abdel Malek, “Orientalism in Crisis,” *Diogenes* 44 (1963): 102-140; and Bernard Cohn’s originally published essays on India in the 1960s and 70s, collected under the title *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990). My point here is not to diminish Said’s significant contribution to postcolonial studies. I am simply pointing out that Said’s book had created such a galvanizing firestorm that had some detractors reacting against the book with unrelenting hostility while at the same time inciting supporters to continue the work of critiquing and dismantling the West’s epistemic control over the “Other.”

Orient and the Oriental person. In studying and knowing the Orient, Said argues that the West comes to own and control the Orient.³⁴

Similar to Fanon's description of the black colonized subject, Said claims that the West held the Oriental person as a negative mirror image of the white, Euro-Westerner. So, while Euro-Westerners are rational, masculine, and progressive, Orientals are exotic, feminine and backward. Given these constructed and imposed identities, Said shows how the West came to legitimize colonialism through the control of the Oriental image.³⁵ The United States continues to perpetuate this Oriental imagery today as evidenced by their involvement in the Middle East and the prevalent stereotyping of Arabs as backward and violent people who practice an irrational Islamic religion.³⁶ This creates the impetus for the United States to legitimize its imperialist agenda similar to the British and French in previous centuries.

However, in mapping the operation of Orientalism, Said falls into the type of colonizer/colonized binary thinking that he first sets out to critique. In addition, he paints the Oriental figure as a defeated person and unable to fight back. More importantly, Said fails to account for the voices of the colonized and their potential for resistance. His follow-up work, *Culture and Imperialism*, attempts to address these limitations. While

³⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 32.

³⁵ Ibid., 109.

³⁶ Said's claim is not without controversy. In particular, Bernard Lewis, an accomplished Oriental scholar has reacted strongly against Said in a series of debates and literary spars. Lewis maintained that Orientalism developed independently of European colonialism. He asserts that the French and English were already conducting studies on the Middle East long before any colonial activities taking place. On the other hand, Said indicted Lewis' scholarship as a prime example of Orientalism at work, and even accused Lewis as ignorant of Middle Eastern affairs and Islam. For a sampling of this (in)famous debate, see Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," in *New York Review of Books* 29, no.11(1982): 49-56; and Oleg Grabar, Edward Said, and Bernard Lewis, "Orientalism: An Exchange," in *New York Review of Books* 29, no.13 (1982): 44.

Orientalism focuses on Europe's invention of the Orient and its imposition on the "Other" through academic discourse, *Culture and Imperialism* argues that culture acts as another avenue where Europe legitimizes its colonial attitudes. Said insists on the inherent political nature embedded within European literary and cultural studies, and argues that the West effectively imposed and legitimized its superiority over others through its literary culture. In Said's eyes, these seemingly "neutral" works of European literature in actuality denigrate indigenous and traditional cultures of the colonies.³⁷

Said believes that the experience of colonialism creates an intricate and intertwined relationship between the colonizer and colonized. Thus, one cannot simply compartmentalize them into separate entities and distinct identities. Said is interested in uncovering voices of resistance hidden beneath colonial rhetoric. Whenever there is colonialism, there will always be a hidden resistant voice that goes against the grain. Thus, Said suggests a strategy of "contrapuntal reading" where a colonial text is read simultaneously with an anti-colonial text in order to locate fissures and hidden resistant voices.³⁸

³⁷ Said finds evidence of this through the exploration of famous English novelists such as Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling. For example, Austen's famous novel *Mansfield Park* describes the plantation owner's wealth. However, Austen did not bother to take into account where the wealth came from, something which Said describes as an "aesthetic silence." This was legitimated by the plantation owner's exploits overseas, that is, in the colonies. Said exposes the notion that a seemingly neutral and beloved novel by Jane Austen does indeed legitimized colonialism as the colonial subject exists in the background of the novel, exploited by their white masters. This is succinctly argued in the section, "Jane Austen and Empire." See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 80-97.

³⁸ Said defines contrapuntal as a connection of disparate social practices of culture and empire, of history and the present that can "think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others." (*Culture and Imperialism*, 36)

Equally important for Said is his suggestion that the (former) colonized world must move beyond the “rhetoric of blame and defensiveness,” that is, blaming the colonizer for all of their current problems.³⁹ Because of the complex and shifting world we inhabit today, Said recognizes that things cannot simply be reduced to “black and white” scenarios: colonizer/dominant center = bad; colonized/marginalized = good. In *Culture and Imperialism*, we see Said’s attempt to locate agency among the marginalized. He suggests that the most effective tactic of resistance is by engaging the dominant culture through a variety of hybrid cultural works. This counters dominant culture without simplistically rejecting it.⁴⁰ Said acknowledges that all cultures are essentially hybrid, and any effective analysis on culture, identity, and resistance has to reflect on this reality.

Said’s theorizing of Orientalism and the impossibility of delinking colonizer and colonized cultures provide an important analytical lens for my project. So much about the way Malays portray Chinese Malaysians is through an Orientalist lens. Since the Malays are in power, they are actively rewriting Malaysia’s historical narrative that privileges Malay voices. In doing so, they have also reconstructed the Chinese as “ungrateful foreigners” and “greedy” money grubbers. In other words, the Chinese are “Othered” by the Malays. Moreover, these imageries trap the Chinese along essentialized categories of identity. By utilizing Said’s suggestion of reading against the grain of Malaysian history, a different story and image of the Chinese begin to emerge. Rather than a bounded group,

³⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 81.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 330.

Chinese Malaysians are a heterogeneous community with different cultural, social, and religious backgrounds.

I now turn my attention to the work of Homi Bhabha, who is an important figure in theorizing hybridity's potential for resistance. Central to Bhabha's analysis is that identities are fluid. Any statements on identities as fixed are at best, illusory. In the introductory pages of *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that:

The move away from the singularities of "class" or "gender" as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.⁴¹

For Bhabha, the structure of colonialism is based on ambivalence, not fixity. It is because of this ambivalence, located in the "in-between spaces" of culture that the colonized and marginalized possess agency for resistance and subversion.⁴² These spaces are areas for

⁴¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2-3.

⁴² To be sure, Bhabha does not equate agency with the modernistic ethos of individual and/or cultural sovereignty that is a central tenet of liberal individualism. Rather, Bhabha's idea of postcolonial agency derives from a colonial context that does not grant sovereignty to the colonized, arguing instead for an impersonal and involuntary agency. (*The Location of Culture*, 205) See Homi Bhabha and John Comaroff, "Speaking of Postcoloniality in the Continuous Present: A Conversation," in *Relocating Postcolonialism*, edited by David Theo Golderg and Ato Quayson (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 15-46; Ilan Kapoor, "Acting in a Tight Spot: Homi Bhabha's Postcolonial Politics," in *New Political Science* 25, no.4 (2003): 561-577; and Prabhu's *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects*. Also, see Young's *Colonial Desire*; and Brett Nicholls, "Disrupting Time: Post-Colonial Politics in Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*," in *Southern Review* 30, no.1 (1997), 4-25 for critiques of Bhabha's conception of postcolonial agency.

the creation of “new signs of identity.”⁴³ They are the hybrid product of opposing cultures, and Bhabha argues that these conditions are the greatest source for creativity.

Nevertheless, the project of overcoming oppression becomes impossible because of the irretrievably fractured and blurred conditions of the postcolonial self.⁴⁴ I have mentioned earlier that Fanon had influenced Bhabha a great deal. While greatly acknowledging Fanon’s ideas on the black psyche and identity formation, Bhabha also critiques the dualistic notions implicit in Fanon’s writings. In his essay, “What Does the Black Man Want?,” Bhabha reinterprets Fanon and moves away from the binaries between the colonizer and colonized, or rather of the Self and the Other.⁴⁵ Such binaries, argues Bhabha, “function in a kind of narcissistic reflection of the One in the Other which is confronted in the language of desire by the psychoanalytic process of identification.”⁴⁶ The colonial subject is *not* caught being the Self or the Other, but rather suspended in the gap *between* the Self and Other. This is the liminal space of identity. Bhabha’s

⁴³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2.

⁴⁴ Sankaran Krishna, *Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 93-94.

⁴⁵ Bhabha’s analysis of colonialism and identity construction heavily employs Lacanian psychoanalysis. As such, Bhabha believes that many scholars had misinterpreted Fanon. According to Bhabha, Fanon’s interpretation of Lacan’s mirror stage had led him to conclude that the black collective unconscious self has taken over negated archetypes, that is, archetypes belonging to White Europeans. Thus, the effect of colonialism is that the colonized always perceive themselves “in white terms.” This white mirror image is internalized which then becomes pathological to the psyche of colonized peoples. Bhabha on the other hand, felt that Fanon “turns too hastily from the ambivalences of identification to the antagonistic identities of political alienation and cultural discrimination.” For Bhabha, a more accurate Lacanian reading would tend more towards the possibility of creating and negotiating identity, that is, the ambivalent space occupied by the colonized subject. See Bhabha, “What Does the Black Man Want?”; David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Mrinalini Greedharrry, *Postcolonial Theory & Psychoanalysis: From Uneasy Engagements to Effective Critique* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and Eleanor Byrne, *Homi K. Bhabha* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴⁶ Homi Bhabha, “What Does the Black Man Want?” in *New Formations* no.1 (1987): 120.

observation contends that identity is never a finished product, which marks the site of ambivalence.

Utilizing a multitude of disciplines such as psychoanalysis, cultural analysis, and literary criticism, Bhabha locates these interstitial spaces and fissures in cultural production in order to locate the spaces of resistance for marginalized communities. He argues that Fanon's "psychoanalytic framework illuminates the 'madness' of racism, the pleasure of pain, [and] the agonistic fantasy of political power."⁴⁷ Bhabha argues for a "third space" of negotiation that bridges the violent and traumatic encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. This space allows for the productive and aesthetic space of a new cultural formation, thus creating an identity that is "neither the one thing nor the other" – hybrid.

Similar to Said, Bhabha blurs the categories of "colonizer" and "colonized" and argues that these two groups cannot be viewed as separate entities that define themselves independently. In Bhabha's view, new hybridized identities emerge due to the experience of colonialism where continual exchange and interactions between the colonizer and colonized occur. This hybrid identity is ambivalent and in turn challenges the validity and authenticity of essentialized and static identities derived from the colonizer. For, while destabilizing the colonial narrative, hybridity's ambivalence also empowers the colonized to resist and interrupt it: "The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 58.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

Closely interrelated with Bhabha's hybridity is the concept of mimicry. Mimicry is the strategy employed by the colonized to create ambivalence in order to subvert colonial dominance. Because the colonial structure needs to be understood as superior than its native counterpart, this creates an occasion for the native, in their "sly civility," to destabilize authority. Through the native's acts of mimicry, they rupture the dominant discourse and transform it into "an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a partial presence."⁴⁹ These acts of mimicry are at once "a resemblance and menace;" it is the "not quite" of the colonized that disrupts colonial dominance.⁵⁰

Bhabha presents an instance of agency and resistance in British India. Following the colonial policy to reform the administrative and education system, the British colonial government in India had hoped to produce well-mannered Indian subjects in order to "civilize" the population. Because the British required intimate knowledge from the natives for the colonial machinery to run smoothly, the British also had to train local Indian bureaucrats to help run the affairs of the colony. Yet, the local bureaucrats cannot be fully trained in western ways because of the fear that they might learn the meaning of liberty, independence, and freedom. Thus, the attempt to mimic the "civilized Englishmen" results in what Bhabha calls "a mode of representation that marginalizes the monumentality of history [and] mocks [colonial] power to be a model... which supposedly makes it imitable."⁵¹ Ultimately, Bhabha argues that colonialism is a self-defeating enterprise because it is "the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules

⁴⁹ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 125.

of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and re-implicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power.”⁵²

Bhabha’s theory of hybridity shies away from any talks of revolutionary politics since the “naïve” and romantic narrative of a totalizing revolution ala Fanon and Césaire is no longer tenable. Instead, he opts for a performative tactic of everyday survival, mechanisms that subvert and undercut the system. Bhabha’s ideas of mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity present the postcolonial person with gaps and spaces to engage in creative resistance. It is also important to point out that Bhabha’s work has duly impinged upon us that the exercise of recovering some type of primordial pre-colonial identity is impossible and unattainable. Identities have always been hybrid.

If Bhabha is interested in recovering agency and voices for the marginalized, Bengali scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak inquires if this is even possible at all. Unlike Bhabha, Spivak’s concern centers on the issue of representation. A self-professed “eclectic” scholar, Spivak is concerned with the voice of the subaltern (such as women, the currently and formerly colonized and economically disadvantaged), even as she questions the very notions of these categorical constructs.⁵³ In particular, she is

⁵² Ibid., 110.

⁵³ Antonio Gramsci first employed the term “subaltern” in his *Prison Notebooks* to refer to the lowermost classes of people either due to their race, class, gender, religion, and/or sexual orientation. More importantly however, I want to point out a major school of thought in India that gained popularity in 1980s. Led by Ranajit Guha and calling themselves the Subaltern Collective, these scholars (mostly historians) sought to move away from elitist colonial and bourgeois nationalist interpretations of Indian history. Instead, they are dedicated to recovering and writing the history of the non-elites – the subalterns – and recasting them as the agents of political and social change. In the process of recovering the subaltern, Guha rephrases “subaltern” to refer to the “demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite.” See Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 35. I should also mention that Spivak was once an active member of the Collective before setting her sights to more “eclectic” forms of scholarship and academic inquiry. For more an excellent primer on the Subaltern Studies Collective and their contributions to

apprehensive of the misappropriation of the term “subaltern” by those who claim to be disenfranchised by the dominant system but are not.⁵⁴

Spivak earned some degree of notoriety with the publication of her famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in 1985.⁵⁵ She is suspicious of the self-congratulatory scholarship that speaks of recovering and reinserting of subaltern voices. Using the example of a young Bengali woman’s suicide in a *sati* ritual in colonial India (her representation of the subaltern), she describes how this story gets reappropriated both by British “humanitarian” discourse calling for the abolishment of the ritual *and* native Hindu policy encouraging women to perform their religious duties. Given these two polarities, Spivak argues that women’s voices are lost in the process even while these two groups are attempting to provide them with one. If women were once caught and silenced in the relay between colonialism and national liberation struggles in the past, the

subaltern history, see David Ludden, ed., *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (London: Anthem, 2002). Also see Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000); Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) especially “Chapter 2: Disavowing Decolonization: Nationalism, Intellectuals, and the Question of Representation in Postcolonial Theory,” 68-143; and El Habib Louai, “Retracing the Concept of the Subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical Developments and New Applications,” in *African Journal of History and Culture* 4, no.1 (2012): 4-8.

⁵⁴ In an insightful interview with Leon De Kock, Spivak laments that “many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous... just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don’t need the word ‘subaltern’... They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are... and since they can speak... they’re within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern.” (“Interview,” 46) For more information, see Leon De Kock, “Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa,” in *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 23, no.3 (1992): 29-47.

⁵⁵ There are several versions of this article. The original publication was published as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations of Widow-Sacrifice,” in *Wedge* 7, no.8 (1985): 120-130. A longer republished version can be found in Williams and Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse*, 66-111.

subaltern disappears in the “violent shuttling” between multinational capital and culturalism today.⁵⁶ It is in the appropriation of the subaltern voice that s/he is silenced.

Given the subaltern’s marginalization and the postcolonial elite’s inability to relate to their plight, Spivak concludes that the subaltern could NOT speak.⁵⁷ For Spivak, there is confusion among scholars that assume a symmetrical relation between the speaker and listener which leads to the conclusion that the subaltern can act resistively and have full knowledge to speak on their own. Because speaking is a transaction between the speaker and listener, the subaltern could not achieve that dialogical level even if they do speak. These voices do not necessarily transfer out to the Center, and the Center may not understand or support it. If these voices do transfer to the Center, they are not subaltern voices anymore for they will have gained access to power.⁵⁸

Spivak maintains that one must differentiate between the subaltern and the postcolonial. She suggests that postcolonials are the group of decolonized peoples who

⁵⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 102.

⁵⁷ Since the publication of “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” many scholars have revered, reviled, critiqued and debated on the conclusion of the essay. I do not wish to join in on this debate whether the subaltern could speak. Rather, I want to point out how Spivak has to revisit her essay over and over again as she attempts to make her points clearer and defend her stance against the onslaught of detractors. Common critiques of the article usually address Spivak’s “elitist” stance, her unwillingness to listen to subaltern voices, and her disinterest in radical politics. After countless reprinting and debates, Spivak became concerned with the article’s constant misappropriation and misunderstandings. To this end, she revised and incorporated it in her book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, where she maintains that her point of the article is not whether the subaltern could speak, but whether they could be *heard*. See Jill Didur and Teresa Heffernan, “Revisiting the Subaltern in the New Empire,” in *Cultural Studies* 17, no.1 (2003): 1-15; Priya Narismulu, “Examining the Undisclosed Margins: Postcolonial Intellectuals and Subaltern Voices,” in *Cultural Studies* 17, no.1 (2003): 56-84; J. Maggio, “Can the Subaltern Be Heard?”: Political Theory, Translation, Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” in *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 32, no. 4 (October 2007): 419-443; and Roi Wagner, “Silence as Resistance before the Subject, or Could the Subaltern Remain Silent?,” in *Theory, Culture & Society* 29, no.6 (2012): 99-124. Also see Stephen Morton’s excellent primer on Spivak in *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

⁵⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic,” in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, edited by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 158.

have benefited from cultural imperialism, and imbued with power through the colonial situation by continuous contact and conversation with colonial ideologies. It is important to mention that for Spivak, the postcolonials (including scholars) are unable to escape from their own privileged position. She is concerned with the fact that postcolonial studies may ironically reinscribe and co-opt neo-colonial imperatives of political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural erasure. In other words, the postcolonial critic may unknowingly be complicit in perpetuating imperialism even as they recognize their inherent oppressed state within the dominant system: “This impossible ‘no’ to a structure, which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately, is the deconstructive philosophical position and the everyday here and now named ‘post-coloniality’ is a case of it.”⁵⁹

While the postcolonial is comprised of colonized intelligentsia who possess the ability to converse with the culture that was built through the experience of colonialism, the subaltern is rendered invisible because they do not possess such a privilege.⁶⁰ For Spivak, the subaltern belongs outside the culture of imperialism. They represent those who are completely left out of the narrative and rendered invisible from society. Hence, they could not speak. Spivak’s interrogation on the status of the postcolonial and the subaltern subjects forces scholars to consider issues that are taken for granted in

⁵⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 60.

⁶⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 225.

postcolonial studies. She duly points out that our task as postcolonial scholars is to create and open up spaces for the subaltern to speak.⁶¹

At first glance, this exploration of Spivak may not have any connection with the overall discourse on identity formation. On the contrary, I believe that Spivak's take on subaltern agency provides a useful tool for this dissertation. What she offers to my project is not just an awareness of the contradictions and silences inherent in dominant discourses, but also in postcolonial discourses as well, "showing the absences around which they cohere, without claiming a transcendent position from which one can escape one's own complicity in structures of domination."⁶² To reiterate, even though Spivak centers her critique on Euro-Western flaws in critical theory, she is also attempting to exemplify a broader problem found among postcolonial intellectuals and scholars who are interested in addressing the plight of marginalized communities – the issue of representation and agency. Spivak reminds me that I must be attentive to the voices of my research participants and not hastily jump to tried and true "postcolonial" explanations.

⁶¹ To this end, Spivak advocates for a kind of strategic essentialism that serves as a counter to the problem of speaking for the subaltern. This should not be mistaken as universal truth. Rather, it is a strategic device deployed to mobilize a constituency, such as an ethnicity or race, to bring forward their group identities in resistance against structures that are bent on assimilating or essentializing marginalized communities. Together with the question of "can the subaltern speak," Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism is equally as controversial. Again, I do not wish to engage in debate whether this concept is useful or not. As with many of Spivak's works, many scholars have misunderstood and reacted either positively or negatively against strategic essentialism. In particular, Spivak is leery of less "scrupulous" practitioners who ignore the word "strategy," and instead treat it as "a union ticket for essentialism." See Sara Danus and Stefan Jonsson, "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," in *Boundary 2* 20, no.2 (1993): 24-50. Spivak has since disavowed that term though not quite fully abandoning the concept itself. This concept also features prominently in Queer Studies and feminist theories. See, for example, Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Susan Abraham, "Strategic Essentialism in Nationalist Discourses: Sketching a Feminist Agenda in the Study of Religion," in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25, no.1 (2009): 156-161; and Ann Heilmann, "Gender and Essentialism: Feminist Debates in the Twenty-First Century," in *Critical Quarterly* 53, no.4 (2011): 78-89.

⁶² Krishna, *Globalization and Postcolonialism*, 104.

What this means is that at some point during my research, I have to acknowledge the incongruent or mystifying stories from my research participants that may be at odds with how I might traditionally view identity, agency, and resistance.

Putting it All Together

I have tried to show the major trends and tensions that exist in postcolonial studies as it pertains to my research topic.⁶³ By way of summary, there is an underlining tension between those who advocate for a politics of revolution, and those who are invested in a politics of subversion. There is also a divide between materialist and discursive ways of inquiry. While recent contributions to postcolonial studies are illuminating and creative, they lack certain pragmatic political usefulness. Moreover, postcolonial studies falls into the clichéd devices and explanations that are comfortable and familiar. With the excessive emphases on textual deconstruction and abstract theorizing, contemporary postcolonial discourse runs the risk of losing an engagement with the real world.⁶⁴

⁶³ I realize that I have spent the majority of this chapter discussing postcolonial thought and little on such an incredibly complex term as identity formation. In particular, my intention in this chapter is to mostly point out how postcolonial discourse analyzes and theorizes identity formation, which I contend, is heavily influenced by psychoanalytical tendencies. Since I am addressing the various forms of identity, including religious identity, I will dedicate the next chapters in exploring these concepts.

⁶⁴ Perhaps due to the fact that postcolonial studies continue to be attached around English and Cultural Studies departments, many of the writings produced utilized a bevy of psychoanalytic and literary methodologies. For example, the danger in Bhabha's conception of hybridity is its distance from lived experience, stemming from his reliance on textuality. Historian Arif Dirlik charges that postcolonial theorizing is a "luxury based on the availability of mobility and surplus pleasure to a privileged few, while the mass majority of others are condemned to labor below the living standards of the colonial period." (*The Postcolonial Aura*, 56) Central to his critique is the epistemological problem of the production of meaning in linguistic encounters that somehow transform into a metaphor for all encounters. In other words, literary works will somehow suffice as evidence and representative of the material world. As far as he is concerned, these are self-indulgent questions which obscure the problems of social, political and cultural domination. While Dirlik is not particularly interested in identity construction or the question of hybridity per se, we can take his critique as pointing towards the inability of postcolonial scholars, who themselves are hybridized individuals, to recognize their own privileged position. See Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third*

Not that there is anything wrong with this theoretical move. In fact, it is rather necessary. But a gap now exists between abstract sophisticated theorizing prevalent in literary and cultural circles and the ethnographic fieldwork that takes into account the social and political implications of “everyday” people’s constructed identities. What I am stressing here is postcolonial studies is too caught up in linguistic exercises, paying only lip service to material examples on the ground, while ignoring the present lived situations of everyday people. As Benita Parry summarizes:

In the realm of postcolonial studies... discussion of the internal structures of texts, enunciations, and sign-systems became detached from a concurrent examination of social and experiential contexts, simulations, and circumstances. A theoretical position wholly neglectful of political economy has had the effect of disengaging colonialism from historical capitalism and re-presenting it for study as a cultural event... the effect of [postcolonial] scholars’ one-sided concern with the constitution of “otherness”/alterity/difference... has been to cause matters of discourse undeniably to take precedence over the material and social conditions prevailing during colonialism and the post-independence era. The postcolonial shift away from historical processes has meant that discursive or “epistemic” violence has tended to take precedence in analysis over institutional practices of the violent social system of colonialism.⁶⁵

In the face of the global war on terror, closing of borders, increased xenophobia and unrestricted march of global capitalism, the strategy proposed via the subversive performance of hybrid identity may not be as effective a tactic of resistance. In this dissertation, I hope to demonstrate that hybridity may not be *the* answer, although it may

World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997). See also Nigel Gibson, “Thoughts about Doing Fanonism in the 1990s,” in *College Literature* 26, no.2 (1999): 96-117. Also useful is Aijaz Ahmad who criticizes how postcolonial studies’ use of literary techniques and hermeneutics in texts have in effect, flattened historical differences, and reduced the contemporary context into an instance of a “psychodrama.” See Aijaz Ahmad, “Postcolonial Theory and the ‘Post-’ Condition,” in *Socialist Register* 33 (1997): 353-381.

⁶⁵ Benita Parry, “The Institutionalization of Postcolonial Studies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, edited by Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 74-75.

be *an* answer, because it flattens complex power relationships that exist within one's own marginalized context.

While I am certain that Bhabha is aware of his own lived experience as a diasporic Indian postcolonial critic, he does not constructively draw on the lived contexts around him. In other words, Bhabha's theory of hybridity demonstrates a failure to be culturally significant.⁶⁶ To address this flaw, I am advocating for a nuanced assessment of the way we analyze hybridity in postcolonial studies. Through a re-assessment of hybridity by incorporating what I call unequal belonging in the construction of identity among Pentecostal Chinese Malaysians, we can begin to rethink how one could examine identity and agency in ways that could effectively engage hegemonic discourses perpetrated by the dominant structure. Indeed, the process of economic and political marginalization goes hand in hand with discursive/cultural domination. Ultimately, any serious work of justice in the postcolonial world must move beyond descriptive projects of reclaiming lost memories and identities and toward to an analytical project of evaluating the utility of hybrid identities as a method of resistance.

⁶⁶ Here, I am thinking of Martha Nussbaum's criticism of Judith Butler's writings as both incomprehensible and out of touch with the real world. As a political philosopher, Nussbaum attacks Butler on two fronts. First, she argues that Butler is really rehashing old ideas, albeit in new technical jargon. Nussbaum argues that because Butler's prose is so dense and abstract, it "bullies" the reader into believing Butler's arguments to be significant: "the imagined reader poses few questions, requests no arguments and no clear definitions of terms." Second, and more importantly, Nussbaum castigates Butler for advocating a type of feminism that encourages women to disengage from public engagement to retreat to a "sexy" politics of subversion. Certainly, these are scathing charges against such a prominent scholar as Butler. But they are not unprecedented. Endless theorizing coupled with a retreat from public engagement because they are the public square is "irredeemably corrupt" can be dangerous. As scholars, we are trained to be suspicious of universal norms for justice and liberation. Going "rogue" or "off the grid" may sound "risqué," but I insist, and I think Nussbaum would agree, that this cannot be the sole reason for a disengagement from the real world as it creates a disservice and damage to workers of justice that are on the ground fighting for equality and freedom for marginalized peoples. For more information on this fascinating debate, see Martha Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody," *The New Republic Online*, February 2, 1999, <http://www.tnr.com/archive/0299/022299/nussbaum022299.html> (accessed July 5, 2012).

Methodology

Due to the inter-disciplinary nature of the research, my dissertation incorporates various methodologies. While I utilize ethnographic methods in the data collection process, specifically through participant observation and in-depth interviews, I also incorporate the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu who conducted ethnographic work as a sociologist. The data collected from my interviews and observations will become the primary means of gaining insights to the world of Malaysian Chinese Christians. Their insights will serve as “conversation partners” then critique and interrogate the scholarship on hybridity. The collected data will also converse alongside within the larger scholarly discourse on postcolonialism and identity formation. Finally, I conduct selective literature review and analysis areas such as the discourse on ethnic identities and the scholarship on religious conversion.

During the first half of 2011, I conducted fieldwork at a Pentecostal church located in the city of Subang Jaya, a suburb that is part of the greater Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area.⁶⁷ For the purpose of confidentiality, I replaced the actual name of the church with a pseudonym – Metro Church. Metro Church is part of the Assemblies of God denomination, one of the fastest growing Christian denominations in Malaysia. Formed in the 1980s by break-away members of a now defunct larger Pentecostal church, Metro Church is open to all non-Muslims and non-Malays, although the church is composed mainly of Chinese members. For my interviews, I used a variety of languages ranging from Cantonese, Malay, and English. I conducted Interview sessions on a one-

⁶⁷ Malaysians call the surrounding suburbs around the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area as the “Klang Valley.”

on-one basis. All my participants were adults ages eighteen years and older. I chose one-on-one interviews over focus group interviews so that I could facilitate a space that is safe for participants to freely express themselves. In addition, one-on-one interviews are appropriate for addressing sensitive and/or controversial topics that people might be reluctant to discuss in group settings. I assigned different names for my participants to protect their identities and for confidentiality. With their consent, I audio taped all interviews. I also kept notes of important words as well as my observations of the participant's mannerisms, behaviors and other intangible properties that could not be captured through an audio recording device. Each interview session lasted between one to three hours. To further facilitate a free and safe interview space, I conducted the interviews in places that my participants found most comfortable. These included private residences, coffee shops, public parks, and restaurants. The interviews centered on in-depth discussions about my participants' world and experiences. I considered my interviewees to be the "experts," while my task as the interviewer was "to listen, observe with sensitivity, and encourage the interviewee to respond."⁶⁸

Along with one-on-one interviews, I engaged in participant observations in various locales, per the consent of my participants. The most obvious setting for my observations was Sunday worship services. However, I also observed various non-Sunday church-sanctioned activities. These included prayer meetings, held every Wednesday night at the church sanctuary, and Friday night "CARE Groups." These groups function as small devotional/cell groups to help each other grow deeper in their

⁶⁸ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2006), 25.

faith. These observations gave me an opportunity to observe the lives of my participants outside the Sunday service. I identified my degree of participant involvement to that of a participant-as-observer. As a participant-as-observer, I entered the field with the full acknowledgment of my own investigative purposes. Even though I have established a relationship with the church in the past, I did not approach them as “one of my own people,” nor did I claim to have any sort of integration into the routines and lived realities of my participants.⁶⁹ Perhaps the most important realization for me as a researcher as participant-as-observer is that this role dispels any claims to objectivity in the research; there is a greater degree of negotiation taking place between the researcher and the participant in terms of space and relational ethics.⁷⁰

I also did not wish to limit myself to simply observing “official” church-based activities and functions. Thus, apart from these formal settings, I observed and participated in various non-church social activities and gatherings, that is, activities not organized by the church, in places such as coffee shops, restaurants, parks, malls, and private residences. These non-church activities ranged from dinner parties, mahjong sessions, house-warming ceremonies, weddings, outdoor activities, birthdays, funerals, and day trips. Finally, my observations included informal conversations with people. These interactions provided me with opportunities to gather information that otherwise would not have presented itself in a more formal interview setting.

The last component of the data gathering process involved a content analysis from materials gathered from my fieldwork. This included worship bulletins, meeting agendas

⁶⁹ Thomas Lindlof, and Bryan Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2002), 147.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 148.

and minutes, church pamphlets, and various literatures available at the church foyer. In addition to printed materials, I made note of the various material artifacts around the church and in people's homes. These included posters, pictures, books, newspapers, figurines, home decorations, and memorabilia.

Along with my qualitative data, this project incorporates a historical narrative of the Chinese in Malaysia. The historical narrative situates and locates my research participants along a trajectory. While this is not a straight-forward historical retelling, the inclusion of the history of Chinese migration to Malaysia highlights how the reproduction of social and cultural practices in contemporary Chinese Malaysians are inherited practices of the past. The practices and cultural givens of Metro Church members as products of historical forces relates to my use of Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, fields, and capital.⁷¹

At this juncture, I wish to point out how *habitus*, fields, and capital play a significant role in my overall research design. These concepts are seminal to an understanding of and engagement with issues of identity constructions - how they are negotiated and maintained.⁷² According to Bourdieu, *habitus* is an individually operationalized set of expectations and understandings based on the collection of experiences social agents encounter that shape their sense of the "rules of the game." Meanwhile, the field is the arena of social positions structured internally in terms of

⁷¹ Bourdieu is far more than an ahistorical "reproduction theorist. Rather, history looms large in his studies as he believes that every social object is historical. Further, Bourdieu contends that sociology should also be conceived as a "social history of the present." For more information, see George Steinmetz, "Bourdieu, Historicity, and Historical Sociology," in *Cultural Sociology* 51, no.1 (2011): 45-66; and Philip Gorski, ed., *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

⁷² Here, I am only providing a brief introduction and overview of Bourdieu and his theoretical frameworks here. A full treatment and nuanced picture of Bourdieu will be explored throughout the dissertation.

power relationships between social agents. The social agents “merely need to let themselves follow their own social ‘nature,’ that is, what history has made of them, to be as it were, ‘naturally’ adjusted to the historical world they are up against.”⁷³ Finally, Bourdieu’s concept of capital goes beyond Marx’s idea of accumulated labor in its materialized form. Rather, he expands and reintroduces capital to fully account for the structure and functioning of the social world. Thus, depending on the field where social actors operate, capital presents itself in other forms such as economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital.

Bourdieu sees everyday life as consisting of not one but a conglomeration of fields such as leisure, family patterns, consumption, work, and artistic practices.⁷⁴ These conglomerations act as social arenas of struggle over the appropriation of capital.⁷⁵ This framework is extremely useful for the dissertation since I am observing and interacting with people outside the confines and operation of the church. By utilizing Bourdieu’s frameworks, I demonstrate that hybridity constructions are closely intertwined with questions of power, and that religious practitioners operate within complex and shifting fields of relations. I view the religious life of Chinese Pentecostals in Malaysia as a field in the Bourdieuan sense in which diverse forms of capital are both invested and generated in interactive processes between and among each other, and those outside the faith community. Finally, Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts are extremely useful in the

⁷³ Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 90.

⁷⁴ Pekka Sulkunen, “Sociology Made Visible – on the Cultural Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu,” *Acta Sociologica* 25 (1982): 106-107.

⁷⁵ See specifically Pierre Bourdieu, and Loic Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). This is an extremely useful book which captures most of Bourdieu’s theories and methods via a transcribed interview with Wacquant.

simultaneous examination of both individual human conduct and structures of society. These theoretical interlocutors not only enhance my analysis on identity formation, but also provide a more comprehensive account of the relation between agency and structure.

Limitations: Positionality, Power and Representation

Because the discipline of postcolonial studies began in literature and English departments, ethnography has taken a backseat as a legitimate methodology within the discipline, which privileges a more discursive and textual method. I find that discourse analysis is useful in providing tools to analyzing culture and identity. Indeed, Ien Ang succinctly argues that Cultural Studies often prides itself as being a discipline located in the intersections of various discourses, and strives “on a refusal to homogenize plurality and heterogeneity as a way to resist, subvert or evade hegemonic forms of power.”⁷⁶ I want to advocate for an ethnography that does not take part in the traditional understanding of the term, that is, a western academic enterprise of categorizing, collecting, and controlling “barbaric cultures.” Rather, I strive to follow what James Clifford identifies as “tentative, dialogical but still realist, ethnographic histories.”⁷⁷

Yet, words such as “anthropology” and “ethnography” evoke suspicions of essentialism and are stereotyped as irreparably tainted by the colonial enterprise. Further, they ignore disproportionate power relations, and in doing so end up harming the people they study. Ethnographers and anthropologists represent, while the people studied are

⁷⁶ Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, 163.

⁷⁷ James Clifford, “Taking Identity Seriously: ‘The Contradictory, Stony Ground...’” in *Without Guarantees: Essays in Honour of Stuart Hall*, edited by Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie (London: Verso, 2000), 98.

represented. Edward Said sums up the postcolonial critique on ethnography and anthropology succinctly:

I suppose there is some (justified) fear that today's anthropologists can no longer go to the postcolonial field with quite the same ease as in former times. This of course is a political challenge to ethnography on exactly the same terrain where, in earlier times, anthropologists were relatively sovereign. Responses have varied. Some have in a sense retreated to the politics of textuality. Others have used the violence emanating from the field as a topic for postmodern theory.⁷⁸

These are valid accusations, and we should seriously address this complexity.

Nevertheless, I insist that ethnographic research is still salvageable and viable as a method in religious and postcolonial studies as it is the most viable method with regards to my dissertation.⁷⁹

Even though I identify myself as Christian, and the majority of Metro Church's congregation, including the pastor, knows who I am, I acknowledge that there were many elements in the church that appeared foreign to me. I vividly recalled my visits to the church when I was a teenager. I remembered leaving feeling uncomfortable after a typical Sunday worship service. I was not particularly an emotionally expressive person, so I was unsettled by the congregation's open declaration of their love for Jesus. The frenetic and free-flowing speaking in tongues, sermons on submission and obedience, and prophecies of Jesus' return also unnerved me.

⁷⁸ Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15 no.2 (1988): 209.

⁷⁹ I am mindful that ethnographic work is inherently fraught with difficulties. I am reminded of Robert Orsi's reflection on his predicament of being caught "between religious practice and imagination ... and critical analysis" while conducting research on Catholic women's devotion to St. Jude. (*Thank You St. Jude*, 151) Orsi himself was raised Catholic but had left the faith as an adult. I know that I will find myself wrestling with this same dilemma in conducting research among Chinese Pentecostals in Malaysia. See Robert Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Also see Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Returning to the church now as an adult armed with sophisticated theoretical concepts and academic knowledge, I do not expect any changes from the responses and reactions that I experienced as a teenager. I *do*, however, expect to gain a sense of empathy in understanding and appreciating how people believe and do things differently from my own life. Doing ethnographic work involves more than just sound theory and method. I have to be self-reflexive and recognize my place within the field. This means that I have to constantly ask myself why I am feeling uncomfortable every time the congregation began speaking in tongues. Why am I disturbed with the resounding “Yes, Lords,” or every time the pastor proclaims some sort of end-times prophecy? How could well-educated and urban well-to-do Christians come to believe in this? Given my position as a Chinese, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class male, how am I to interpret these phenomenon? How do these lenses influence my observation of the environment, along with my interviews with my participants? The act of being self-reflexive responds to the claim that there is no such thing as a neutral and objective research. I do not claim to know what is really “out there,” readily waiting for me to uncover. I am giving a particularly situated account, while attempting to clue my readers into the lenses that imbue that account.

Without a doubt, there are endless possibilities for distortions in my interview process. Participants could lie and forget key details in their narratives, or the researcher could be blatantly biased. Further, what we write can have dire repercussions and consequences on our participants’ lives. Thus, if this dissertation is to have any legitimacy and honesty, I have to address the uncomfortable issues of positionality, power, and representation inherent in ethnographic research. Taking these issues to heart,

I insist that a careful examination of what people say and do can give us some approximation of what is going on “on the ground,” but simultaneously know that my observation and conclusions will always be incomplete and non-representative of all Chinese people.

I had assumed that while I belonged more or less to the ways and practices of Metro Church, I was an insider. Furthermore, my ethnicity as a Chinese and someone who has interacted with the church in the past only bolstered my status as an insider. This means that I would have easy access to my participants, the ability to read culturally specific non-verbal cues, and perhaps more importantly, be able to present a more authentic (re)presentation of the culture and context I am researching. However, as Sharan Merriam, et. al., explain in their article, “Power and Positionality: Negotiating Insider/Outsider Status Within and Across Cultures,” the issues that researchers encounter in the field are often unanticipated, in subtle ways, and more importantly, are more complex than a simple insider/outsider dichotomy.⁸⁰ Through reflections on their fieldwork experiences – for example, a black woman interviewing black women, and a Korean scholar interviewing her own people “from home” – the authors argue that there are “multiple insider/outsider positionalities and complex power dynamics as well as factors bearing on knowledge construction and representation in the research process.”⁸¹ My past relation with the church and ethnic and religious similarities may provide me with special insider access to the community. I may have *been* an insider once upon a

⁸⁰ Sharan Merriam, Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Ming-Yeh Lee, Youngwha Kee, Gabo Ntseane, and Maznah Muhammad, “Power and Positionality: Negotiating Insider/Outsider Status Within and Across Cultures,” in *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 20, no.5 (2001): 411.

⁸¹ Ibid., 416.

time, but because of my educational background and longstanding absence from the community, I do not think I have the privilege of being called an insider any longer. I am both an insider and outsider. I fall more in the category of what James Banks calls an “indigenous outsider.” According to Banks, indigenous outsiders have experienced high levels of cultural assimilation into an outsider culture (given that I received my post-secondary education degrees in the United States) but remains connected with his/her indigenous community.⁸² When I enter into the world of my participants, I take to heart the realization that positionalities constantly shift depending on one’s context, be it social, economic, gender, and/or ethnic.

Researchers also possess immense amounts of power, since they are tasked with telling the story of the community they study. The question of representation comes into play. How are we to represent them? How can we be sure that we really understand the community we are studying? Most importantly, what effects does our writing/research have on our participants? James Clifford and George Marcus’ edited volume, *Writing Culture*, explores these questions and observes that “ethnographic truths are only partial and incomplete.”⁸³ The authors conclude that we cannot be sure that we are getting things right. We cannot even assume that the researcher can fully capture a pristine picture of his/her research subject. Rather, ethnographic researchers need to recognize the inter-connectiveness and multiple layerings that affect both the researcher and the researched. Reflecting on her fieldwork experience among GLTBQ Christian communities, Melissa

⁸² James A. Banks, “The Lives and Values of Researchers: Implications for Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society,” in *Educational Researcher* 27 (1998): 7.

⁸³ James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford, and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 7.

Wilcox suggests that as “human-subject” researchers, we have the choice among “advocacy, constructive criticism, destructive criticism, and irrelevant or rarified analysis.”⁸⁴ While all options are viable, she states that it is our responsibility to be vigilant against misuse, abuse or exploitation occurring within the choices we make.

Realizing the nature of my research and the level of complexity of involvement with the Chinese Christian community of Metro Church, I choose to maintain, to the extent that it is possible, a level of neutrality throughout the duration of my field work. As a person with immense privilege and intellectual capacity, it is complicated for me to enter into a community and begin interpreting the real meaning behind people’s religious lives. There is a great risk that I may end up representing their stories and lives without acknowledging their voices. Nevertheless, the academic study of religion has always been engaged in the enterprise of “re-reinterpreting” things, and this dissertation is no different.⁸⁵ What I am doing is offer a re-reinterpretation of identity formation and its contribution towards the larger question of hybridity’s efficacy as a means of resistance through an examination of Pentecostal Chinese in Malaysia. Ultimately, the only thing I can do is to attend to the limitations of the academic practice of ethnography, and to be as ethical and responsible as possible with my participants and my readers.

⁸⁴ Melissa Wilcox, “Dancing on the Fence: Researching Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christians,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, edited by James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 59.

⁸⁵ I am grateful to Jonathan Z. Smith for this illuminating statement, presented in his public lecture “Now you See it, Now you Won’t: The Future of the Study of Religion Over the Next 40 Years,” on April 13, 2010 at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He states that as religious scholars, it is our duty to always “re-reinterpret... what is out there.”

Structuring the Argument

Chapter Two begins by introducing the historical background of the Chinese community in Malaysia. It concentrates on how the experience of British colonialism and its policies altered Malaysia's ethnic and political structures. I show how these practices have separated Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups along racial, religious, and socio-economic lines. The British policy of "divide and rule," predicated by nineteenth century European theories of racial superiority and hierarchy, effectively created a plural but ethnically essentialized and bounded Malaysian society. This configuration was simply adopted over by the independent Malayan government. Some of these assumptions are even enshrined in the nation's Constitution. Because of their status as an ethnic minority, the Chinese in Malaysia are pigeon-holed as greedy and untrustworthy migrants who have benefited economically at the expense of the Malays. More importantly, this chapter demonstrates how the *habitus* is informed Malaysia's historical development which then creates cultural and social practices that are carried over to contemporary Malaysia.

The question of what defines a Chinese person is the main focus of Chapter Three. Using my ethnographic data to drive the research, I explore how Metro Church members construct their ethnic identities. This chapter contends that Metro Church members construct what I call a "Modern Chinese" ethnic identity to demarcate between Malays and the "Chinese Chinese." Here, strategy serves as an important outlook as Metro Church members. This identity is a strategic maneuver, structured around the *habitus* to distance themselves from the imposed essentialist categories imposed by the dominant Malays. Nevertheless, I demonstrate how the Modern Chinese identity constitutes an instance of unequal belonging as church members continue to recapitulate

Malay stereotypes of Chinese toward the Chinese Chinese group. This chapter also interrogates and critiques the structure/agency divide that exists in various primordialist and constructivist approaches to ethnic identities. I suggest instead a processual way of examining identity construction that is more in line with Bourdieu's theoretical conceptions of *habitus*, field, and capital.

Chapter Four concentrates on the growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity among Chinese Malaysians. After providing a brief on the history of Pentecostalism in Malaysia, this chapter locates and examines the narratives of Metro Church members through my ethnographic observations. In particular, I examine the conversion narratives of Metro Church members and argue that Christianity functions as a site for the accumulation and optimization of cultural capital. I also show that this capital is limited and unequal because it is only available for those who have mastery of the English language and western ways.

Through the ethnographic data collected from my fieldwork, Chapter Five makes broader connections to the overall discourse on syncretism and hybridity. Once again, I draw on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, *habitus*, and field to examine Chinese Pentecostals' engagement in unequal belonging as they negotiate their identities both as Chinese and Christian. Because a majority of Metro Church's congregants are disproportionately from the urban, middle to upper class sector (i.e. westernized) of the Malaysian population, I show that these constructions of hybridity may not necessarily act as sites of resistance as many postcolonial theorists may have suggested. In particular, I suggest how unequal belonging points to a way of analyzing the more subtle working of power and hegemony that is entrenched even among marginalized communities.

The concluding chapter discusses the implications of my findings in the field of religious studies and postcolonial discourse. I make the case any serious engagement of culture and religion must take into account the lived reality of people on the ground. As such, religious scholars need to hold in tension between their roles as critic and caretaker. I also stress the importance of Orsi's idea of "abundant events" in the religious lives of Christians in the Global South. I also stress that these abundant events, that is, the "presence" of divine/spiritual beings must be taken seriously and analyzed in a direction that moves beyond tried and true modernist analytical categories.

CHAPTER TWO: CHINESE MIGRATION TO MALAYSIA

I grew up in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur just at the outskirts of downtown. My neighbors consisted of people from various ethnic groups in Malaysia – Malays, Chinese, Indians, Sikhs, and Eurasians. Every year on August 31st, I sat in front of the television to watch the National Day parade where representatives of each ethnic group walked across the Prime Minister's stage showing off their kaleidoscope of cultural garbs, music, and dances.

My parents sent me to a public school, where I once more had the pleasure of interacting with children from different ethnic groups. In history class, I learned that the three majority ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese, and Indians – all worked together in the struggle for Malaysian independence from the British. I was proud to be living in a multi-cultural environment where everyone co-existed and worked harmoniously with one another.

One day, while class was in session, a Chinese funeral procession passed by the school. Being curious and inquisitive children, my classmates and I peered through the windows to watch the procession, complete with mourners in sackcloth, a funeral band, an elaborate hearse, and a convoy of cars following. One of my Malay classmates

sneered that “a Chinaman had perished.”⁸⁶ I was shocked at this blatant display of disrespect, not just towards the deceased, but to my own ethnic group. Was he simply being childish? Or was he being ignorant? Or was there something deeper than that? This first experience of racism shattered my perception of Malaysia as a peaceful and harmonious multi-ethnic nation. Behind the façade of unity and harmony there lay deep-seated ethnic and religious tensions among the dominant Malays and ethnic minorities. We are the “pendatang.”⁸⁷ (translated as “immigrants”)

Malaysia is a plural society dominated by the Malays.⁸⁸ The country’s minority groups, such as the Chinese, live in a precarious environment. They face very real political, ethnic, cultural, and religious discrimination.⁸⁹ Malaysia’s current ruling government, the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, hereafter, BN), is a coalition of race-based parties led by the Malay-centric United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The other two component parties, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the

⁸⁶ What my classmate said was intended to be a derogatory remark on the death of a non-Malay and non-Muslim person. I should note that even though I have translated the Malay word “*mampus*” to “perished” in English, any translation will necessarily lose some of its original meaning.

⁸⁷ To be sure, there are many minority groups in Malaysia. However, it is generally recognized among Malaysians that Indians (from Southern India) and Chinese are the primary minority groups of the country. The dominant Malays view themselves as the “indigenous” and “original” people in the country and call themselves *bumiputra* (translated as “sons of the soil”). See for example Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*; T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Cheah Boon Kheng, ed., *The Challenge of Ethnicity: Building a Nation in Malaysia* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004).

⁸⁸ I use the term “Malaysia” to denote Peninsula Malaysia, which will be the main focus of this chapter. I will not be exploring Sabah and Sarawak, two states whose ethnic, political and historical composition are distinct from Peninsula Malaysia. To minimize confusion, I also use the word “Malaysia” to apply to pre-colonial and colonial Malaysia (then called Malaya).

⁸⁹ Since this dissertation focuses mainly on the Chinese in Malaysia, I will not be exploring much on the Indian minority. Nevertheless, we must not forget that the Indians, who number less than the Chinese in Malaysia, are also suffering from the overall oppressive policies of the Malaysian government, if not, worst than the Chinese.

Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), are also part of the coalition to protect the interests of their respective ethnic groups.

While this political union appears to pay equal credence to each ethnic group, in reality, UMNO possesses most of the power and influence. The BN administration recognized Malays as the country's original people. This recognition gives Malays special rights compared to other minority groups. These rights include preserving the sovereignty of Malay rulers, recognizing Malay as the official language, and maintaining Islam as the national religion. They also have the right to preserve the major symbols of Malay culture and religion and incorporate them as Malaysia's official symbols.⁹⁰ Over the course of time, these special rights and privileges have expanded to include setting affirmative action policies for the Malays such as university admissions and discounts on buying homes. UMNO stressed that because the Malays were lagging in economic and social progress compared to non-Malays, they needed additional assistance to catch up with the rest of Malaysian society. Meanwhile, the other component parties largely stood silent as UMNO dictated policies that increasingly marginalized the minority groups, a process which slowly increased ethnic tensions.⁹¹ There is a special mistrust of Chinese,

⁹⁰ The Malays consider these "major symbols," known as *adat*, as part of their cultural and ethnic heritage. They are integral to the formation of Malay identity. I also want to point out that for the Malays, Islam and *adat* are synonymous with each other. However, it becomes difficult to separate Islam from *adat* since they have become such an integral part of Malay customs, and vice versa. There is a common saying among non-Malays that "to be Malay is to be Muslim." See Karim Jahan Wazir, *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan, "A Fresh Look at Islam and Adat in Malay Society," in *Sari* 18 (2000): 23-32; Timothy Barnard, ed., *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004); Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, *Colonial Image of Malay Adat Laws: A Critical Appraisal of Studies on Adat Laws in the Malay Peninsula During the Colonial Era and Some Continuities* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2008); and Gerhard Hoffstaedter, *Modern Muslim Identities: Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in Malaysia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011).

⁹¹ Former US Ambassador to Malaysia John Malott wrote an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* highlighting the deteriorating ethnic relations between the various ethnic groups in the country. He

who are stigmatized by Malays as immigrants who have economically benefitted at the expense of the natives.

Before going further, let me recall Said's theorizing of western Orientalist discourse. As detailed in the previous chapter, Said's book *Orientalism* demonstrates the ways Europe discursively constructed the Middle East through academic writings, and thereby wielded a great deal of power and control – both rhetorical and on the ground – in the Middle East. For Said, culture and academic discourse are not neutral endeavors. In justifying colonialism, Said explains that Orientalism also created false and essentialized images of Arabs and Islam. These “essentialist” Arab identities were negative in comparison to white European identities. Orientalism helped define Europe's self-image as progressive, modern, and rational, and Orientals as backward, degenerate, and irrational.

Even though Said's book is more than thirty years old, his arguments remain relevant and insightful today, especially in light of the current US involvement in the Middle East, which presents the clearest case that Orientalism is alive and well today. The depiction of Arabs and Muslims as backward and anti-democratic people is predicated by profound ignorance and gross essentialisms of culture and identity. This in turn creates an inaccurate and prejudicial view about Islam and Middle Easterners, which in turn justifies US imperial aspirations in the region. Although *Orientalism* situates itself in the Middle East, Said contends that there are counterparts in “similar knowledges” in

faults the UMNO-led government's pro-Malay policies in stroking the fires of racism. As a result of the Malaysian government stirring “the racial and religious pot,” Malott argues that this will ultimately ruin the country's economy and detract businesses from investing in Malaysia. For more information, see John Malott, “The Price of Malaysia's Racism,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704422204576129663620557634.html> (accessed January 14, 2012).

denying, suppressing, or distorting other minority and marginalized groups' systems of thought.⁹² In other words, Said's analysis is not limited towards examination of European attitudes toward Islam and Arabs, but is applicable as an analytical model for any discourse that "others" marginalized groups.⁹³

When we apply Said's analytical lens to the Malaysian context, we begin to see how a long history of false images of the Chinese as "invaders" and "greedy money grubbers" have created false and essentialized images of the Chinese community in Malaysia. Thus, in constructing a historical narrative that privileges the dominant Malays, the ruling government is effectively "othering" the Chinese. Failing to consider the nuanced complexities of the Chinese in Malaysian history has further perpetuated their marginalization. An awareness of the orientalizing attitudes toward the Other is an important step in analyzing Malaysia's current ethnic and social configuration.

In this chapter, I analyze how the British colonial encounter (ca.1786 – 1957) transformed Malaysia's socio-political, economic, and ethnic environment into plural but segregated communities. I focus on the transformation of the Chinese and Malay community and how British rule permanently altered Malaysia's socio-political

⁹² Said mentioned this in the "Afterword" section of the 25th Anniversary edition of *Orientalism*. See Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition, 347.

⁹³ See for example Nicholas Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Peter Marcuse, "Said's Orientalism: A Vital Contribution Today," in *Antipode* 36, no.5 (2004): 809-817; Nadia Abu El-Haj, "Edward Said and the Political Present," in *American Ethnologist* 32, no.4 (2005): 538-555; Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "Postcoloniality and Religiosity in Modern China: The Disenfranchisements of Sovereignty," in *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no.3 (2011): 3-44; and Nazrul Islam, "New Age Orientalism: Ayurvedic 'Wellness and Spa Culture,'" in *Health Sociology Review* 21, no.2 (2012): 220-231.

landscape into its current configuration.⁹⁴ After demonstrating that British colonialism is predicated by nineteenth century European theories of racial superiority and hierarchy, I identify and explore how these ideologies give rise to the divide and rule policy and the colonial census as examples of colonial practices that created a plural but ethnically essentialized Malaysian society.

This chapter also analyzes how these colonial policies became the *habitus* which translates into contemporary social practices/policies that continue to cast the Chinese along essentialized categories in postcolonial Malaysia.⁹⁵ As Bourdieu argues in *The Logic of Practice*, *habitus*, “a product of history, produces individual and collective practices... in accordance with the schemes generated in history.”⁹⁶ Since *habitus* is acquired through the long-term occupation of a position in the social world, I show how

⁹⁴ I should point out that this chapter will only focus on the Chinese in Peninsula Malaysia and I will not be discussing the history of the Chinese in Malaysia’s eastern states, Sabah and Sarawak. Also, for the sake of relevance and brevity, I am excluding the history of Indian migration in Malaysia, whose narratives are just as rich, and important to the overall history of Malaysia. For more information, see Ravindra Jains, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); and Kernal Singh Sandhu, and A. Mani, eds., *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993). Nearly half of this compendious edited volume explores the experience of the Indian community in Malaysia with reputable scholars such as Judith Nagata, Khoo Kay Kim, and Chandra Muzaffar.

⁹⁵ Newer studies have pointed out the need to place the colonizer and the colonized along the same frame of analysis. With regards to the dissemination of racial theory in the colonies, these studies contend that the basic assumption is that race is an unfortunate result of a “hand me down” from colonial authorities. As such, race is a predominantly Western construct imposed on colonized people. These studies question the simplistic characterization of colonized people as victims of the totalizing power of the colonizer. With regards to colonial Malaysia, this perspective points out that *both* colonizer and colonized had theorized about race and significantly contributed to the terms of the discussion and impacted the ways in which the people of modern-day Malaysia talk about race. While this is a much needed and welcomed perspective, it does not deny the coerciveness of the British colonial machinery to spread the idea of race throughout the colony. If anything, it shows how the Malay rulers and British colonial authorities are both complicit in racializing colonial and postcolonial Malaysia. See Sandra Khor Manickam, “Common Ground: Race and the Colonial Universe in British Malaya,” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no.3 (2009): 593-612. See also Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Form of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Ann Laura Stoler, and Frederick Cooper, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁹⁶ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 54.

the post-independent Malaysian government, having unconsciously internalized these colonial structures, recapitulates these structures by continuing to view the Chinese along bounded categories. More importantly, the *habitus* leads to enduring social patterns that Chinese Malaysians have inherited and perceived as the cultural givens of Malaysian society.

I should note that it is not my intention here to provide a comprehensive treatment of Chinese history in Malaysia. Rather, I am highlighting some of British colonial policies that contributed to the orientalizing and essentializing of the Malay and Chinese population.⁹⁷ This provides a useful framework to assess the effects of the legacy of British colonialism on Chinese and Malay relations in Malaysia today.

Early Chinese Migration to Malaysia

The Chinese have co-existed with the Malays since the 1400s. Between 1405 and 1433, the Ming Dynasty dispatched naval expeditions throughout the known world under the auspices of the Yongle emperor (1402-1424). The expeditions' goals were to extend the Ming tributary system and establish Chinese diplomatic presence in various settlements around the globe. The Ming government offered protection to any kingdoms or governments that would enter into a tributary relationship with them. Among the port-states that took advantage of this opportunity was the newly established Melaka Sultanate

⁹⁷ While I will try to highlight the important points of the Chinese experience in Malaysia, the choices that I make to include and/or exclude in the narrative are neither comprehensive nor final. Thus, it should not be considered as the "authoritative account" of the history of the Chinese in Malaysia. For a more comprehensive look on the Chinese in Malaysia, see Lee Kam Hing, and Tan Chee-Beng, eds., *The Chinese in Malaysia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Heng Pek Koon, *Chinese Politics in Malaysia: A History of the Malaysian Chinese Association* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Yen Ching-Hwang, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia and Beyond: Socio-economic and Political Dimensions* (Hackensack: World Scientific Publishing, 2008).

in Malaysia. Strategically located in the middle of the Malaysian peninsula and overlooking the Straits of Melaka, Melaka became a significant mid-point stop for merchants and traders journeying between India and China for much of the fifteenth century. Led by the Ming diplomat Admiral Zheng He, Melaka entered into a suzerainty relationship with the Ming Dynasty and became a protectorate and tributary state.⁹⁸ In return, the Malay rulers of Melaka received Chinese military aid against rival kingdoms and piracy threats.⁹⁹ Having created a diplomatic relationship with the Melaka Sultanate, the Ming government established a small Chinese community in the port city to handle

⁹⁸ Some scholars have suggested that the Zheng He (or “Cheng Ho” and “Sanboa” in other regions) voyages and diplomatic missions was in actuality a form of “proto-colonialism.” Yet, for many Chinese communities across the Southeast Asian region, they considered Zheng He to be the “founding patriarch” of their communities. This is reflected in the various temples and festivals dedicated to the famous Chinese admiral in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. For more information on the colonial tendencies of Ming China, see Karl Hack, and Tobias Rettig, eds., *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Hugh R. Clark, “Frontier Discourse and China’s Maritime Frontier: China’s Frontiers and the Encounter with the Sea through Early Imperial History,” in *Journal of World History* 20 (2009): 1–34. Zheng He has also received much scholarly attention, notwithstanding his role in establishing Chinese presence in Melaka. See Leo Suryadinata, ed., *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005); and Edward Dreyer, *Zheng He and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007).

⁹⁹ One famous and oft-cited historical narrative is that of the marriage between Princess Hang Li Po and the ruler of Melaka, Mansur Shah, as a gesture of maintaining Melaka-Ming diplomatic relations. Arriving to Melaka with a few hundred attendants, the Princess converted to Islam after her marriage. Her attendants inter-married among the Sultan’s court officials, and were given a permanent home at Chinese Hill, which still stands today in Melaka (now a cemetery). At the base of the hill is a water well associated with Hang Li Po and its waters are purported to have healing powers. This story is more than likely a legend rather than a historical fact. It is disputed whether Hang Li Po ever existed in the first place as Ming official records and genealogies do not have any evidence of such a person, nor was there a marriage taking place. In addition, the claim of a royal member of the Ming court converting to another religion would be illegal according to Imperial laws. The only text that describes this event came from the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), a collection of stories chronicling the lives of the rulers of Melaka and government officials, along with their allies and enemies. See Anthony Reid, “Flows and Seepages in the Long-Term Chinese Interaction with Southeast Asia,” in *Sojourners and Settlers*, 23-25 where he argues that the story of a Chinese princess marrying the local ruler is not unique to Malaysia as there are various recorded “Chinese Princess” stories in the various Malay kingdoms in the early fifteenth century. Yet, Malaysian history textbooks continue to incorporate this story into the curriculum. I do not wish to discuss the political motivations behind this move here in detail, but this points towards what Patrick Geary describes as an ethnogenesis project. While Geary’s point of context is on Medieval Europe and its implications on modern-day Europe, his main contention supports the creation of national language, and nationalist literature that is pro-Malay and pro-Islam in Malaysia. For more information, see Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

commercial activities and promote foreign trade with China. Through familial networks, the small Chinese trading community effectively linked the port of Melaka with other Asian coastal ports.¹⁰⁰

It is important to note that this “first wave” of Chinese immigrants was part of a diplomatic mission sanctioned by the Ming Dynasty. They were educated diplomats and professional traders who worked alongside the Melaka Sultanate and intermingled with the local population. Some served as cultural brokers between China and Melaka; a few even became government officials and diplomats for their new communities. Since the Melaka Sultanate integrated foreigners into their administration, the Malay rulers elected leaders of the Chinese community, alongside with other people of different cultural background, to serve as *Shahbandar* (translates as “port official”), overseeing the administration of the port. The Chinese *Shahbandar* also functioned as liaisons to the Sultanate in overseeing Chinese trade activities and regulating Chinese behavior.¹⁰¹ In spite of wide cultural and linguistic differences, Malay rulers worked with the Chinese for mutual gain.

Many of the early Chinese migrants acculturated and assimilated into the local culture through the bonds of matrimony. Because early Chinese immigrants to Malaysia were mostly men, they married local women, and in the process created hybrid communities. Although they were ethnically Chinese, these loosely-defined communities,

¹⁰⁰ Yen Ching-hwang, “Historical Background,” in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, 6.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Kernial Singh Sandhu, and Paul Wheatley, eds., *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital, c. 1400-1980*, 2 vols. (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983); Luis Felipe Ferreira Reis Thomaz, “The Malay Sultanate of Melaka,” in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief*, edited by Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 69-90; and Craig Lockard, “The Sea Common to All: Maritime Frontiers, Port Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, ca. 1450-1700,” in *Journal of World History* 21, no.2 (2010), 219-247.

called *peranakan*, assimilated some Malay cultural traits of their adopted homeland.¹⁰²

Some features of acculturation include speaking Malay as the common/dominant language, wearing Malay-style attire, and adopting Malay-style cuisine and eating habits.¹⁰³ This gives evidence of the relatively loose boundaries of pre-colonial ethnic relations. By the time the Portuguese invaded Melaka in 1511, there was already a small resident Chinese community in the city port.¹⁰⁴

For the next 300 years, Chinese migration to Malaysia stagnated as China became embroiled in its own internal problems with famines, rebellions, and the changing of

¹⁰² In Melaka, these hybrid Chinese are collectively called “Straits Chinese,” or colloquially known as *Baba* (for men) and *Nyonya* (for women). The term *peranakan* translates as “local-born” in Malay. It was not until the British colonial period which where ethnic boundaries became enacted. For the Chinese who did not assimilate to Malay culture, *peranakan* Chinese were not considered to be “full” Chinese. As such, they were usually considered to be a distinct Chinese ethnic group with their own separate agendas. Historical narratives on the Chinese in Malaysia rarely mention the *peranakan* community, mainly because they occupy a hybrid space of not quite Chinese and not quite Malay. It is worth mentioning that *peranakan* society is more a product of cultural synthesis than biological mixing. The issue of *peranakan* Chinese in Malaysia has received much scholarly attention, and rightfully so, warrants a fuller exploration than what is afforded here. For more information, see John Clammer, *The Ambiguity of Identity: Ethnicity Maintenance and Change among the Straits Chinese Community of Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1979); Felix Chia, *The Babas* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1980); Tan Chee-Beng, *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and Identity in a Chinese Peranakan Community* (Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 1988); Lee Su Kim, “The Peranakan Baba Nyonya Culture: Resurgence or Disappearance?” in *Sari* 26 (2008): 161-170; and Tan Chee-Beng, *Chinese Overseas: Comparative Cultural Issues* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

¹⁰³ This appears to be a widespread trait in other regions. For example, in pre-Dutch Java, the Chinese community was free to adopt Indonesian cultural practices or marry into the local society. See Leo Suryadinata, *The Culture of the Chinese Minority in Indonesia* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2004); and Tim Lindsey, and Helen Pausacker, eds., *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005). Also see Mary F. Somers Heidhues, *Southeast Asia's Chinese Minorities* (Hawthorn: Longman, 1974).

¹⁰⁴ Portuguese records speak of a small enclave of Chinese residing in the southern bank of the Melaka River even though there was no mention of a Chinese community leader. According to Anthony Reid, it is not clear why this was the case although he speculates that the Chinese community that emigrated to Melaka in the early 1400s had thoroughly assimilated into the local population. See Reid, “Flows and Seepages,” in *Sojourners and Settlers*, 33. See also Lockard, “The Sea Common to All,” 232. The writing of Tomé Pires also provides an excellent resource for studying life in Melaka. His work, the *Suma Oriental* is one of the earliest European written records on Malaysia. Pires spent some time in Melaka from 1512 to 1515, writing extensively about Melaka under Portuguese rule. Among the topics covered include Portuguese dealings with the various communities in Melaka, notwithstanding the Chinese. See Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, trans. Armando Cortesão (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944).

dynasties. Portuguese and Dutch colonial governments also offered few incentives to attract new Chinese traders to Melaka.¹⁰⁵ Even so, the Chinese community was able to maintain their existence by allying and cooperating with the rulers of the land. They continued trading with other city ports around the Southeast Asian region, namely in Batavia, Manila, and Ayutthaya.¹⁰⁶ The southern Malay kingdom of Johor, established by descendants of the Melaka Sultanate, encouraged and welcomed Chinese settlement and business enterprises. There was also evidence of Chinese involvement in the kingdom's administrative council as well with the presence Malay administrators who spoke and wrote Chinese fluently.¹⁰⁷

Chinese settlement in Malaysia prior to British colonial intervention is significantly different. Chinese settlers were varied which consisted of diplomats, traders, and artisans. Early Chinese migrants were also involved in the administrative affairs of the Malay kingdoms. They worked alongside and cooperated with one another for mutual benefit. The heterogeneous nature of early Chinese migration to Malaysia was absent in

¹⁰⁵ Portuguese and Dutch control of Melaka did little to encourage Chinese migration to Malaysia. The Portuguese were busy putting local rebellions and competing with rival kingdoms from Sumatra. The more monopolistic Dutch, under the administration of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) favored Batavia as their trading port, which transformed Melaka into a sleepy town. There is also a paucity of information about Chinese presence in Melaka from 1500 to the late 1700s. See Sarnia Hayes Hoyt, *Old Malacca* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Dianne Lewis, *Jan Compagnie in the Straits of Malacca, 1641–1795* (Athens: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1995); and Peter Borschberg, ed., *Iberians in the Singapore-Melaka Area (16th to 19th Century)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004).

¹⁰⁶ For more information, see J. Norman Parmer, "Historical Perspectives on Chinese in Southeast Asia," in *Chinese Populations in Contemporary Southeast Asian Societies: Identities, Interdependence and International Influence*, eds. M Jocelyn Armstrong, R. Warwick Armstrong, and Kent Mulliner (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), 24-34.

¹⁰⁷ See Graham Irwin, "The Dutch and the Tin Trade of Malaya in the Seventeenth Century," in *Studies in the Social History of China and Southeast Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell*, edited by Jerome Chen, and Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 267-287; Leonard Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor, 1641-1728* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975); and Carl Trocki, *The Prince of Pirates: The Temanggongs and the Development of Johore and Singapore, 1784-1885* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1979).

the nineteenth century as a mass influx of poor and uneducated Chinese came to Malaysia as laborers. More importantly, there was less separation between each ethnic group during pre-colonial times. Evidence of inter-ethnic marriages between Chinese and local Malays and the creation of *peranakan* hybrid cultures indicate a less rigid conception of ethnic boundaries. Of course, I am not naïve to believe that these communities co-existed harmoniously and free of ethnic tensions. Although there may be instances of ethnic tensions, it did not appear that there was universal distrust between Chinese and Malays, nor were there indications of a creation of essentialized boundaries.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, there was less social and cultural distance/separation between Malays and Chinese during pre-British times.

The Chinese under British Rule

Racializing Discourses

The most significant shift in Malaysia's demographic composition occurred during the British colonial period (ca. 1786-1957). After first colonizing the island of Penang in 1786, the British expanded and consolidated their influence in the region by acquiring Singapore in 1819 and Melaka in 1824. The British converted these three cities, known as the Straits Settlements, into free ports. The signing of the Pangkor Treaty in 1874 also heralded the annexation of more interior Malaysian territories as the need for raw materials to manufacture commercial goods in Europe became increasingly vital and

¹⁰⁸ See P.J. Begbie, *The Malayan Peninsula* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967). Begbie, an artillery officer stationed in India in the early 1800s recorded accounts of Malay history and the conditions of the Malay states before English colonization in Malaysia. Of particular interest is his report of a massacre of Chinese workers in the town of Linggi by Malay soldiers. (*The Malayan Peninsula*, 408)

lucrative.¹⁰⁹ Under the terms of the treaty, the British assigned Resident Advisors to assist the Malay rulers in all matters of governance, except for issues pertaining to Islam and the Malay culture. By the early 1900s, the British consolidated its hold across Peninsula Malaysia. They soon began a rigorous economic program to harvest the region's rich resources of raw materials such as tin, tea, rubber and palm oil. Thanks to large British capital investments, there was a great demand for manual labor to extract these materials to meet the demands of European industrialization. This marked the creation of a plural society in Malaysia as thousands of Chinese and Indian laborers migrated to the colony in search of work.

Let me stress here again that I am not reconstructing a history of British rule in Malaysia.¹¹⁰ Rather, I am highlighting how British colonialism altered ethnic relations between Chinese and Malays. The British set up policies rooted in nineteenth century European scientific theories of racial superiority. Late nineteenth century Europe witnessed a shift in ideological thinking in terms of race. The height of Social Darwinism, pseudo-scientific theories of the human race, and the seemingly unfettered dominance of Europe around the globe contributed to the development of the idea of

¹⁰⁹ The constant squabbling and claims to the throne by rival Malay chieftains, coupled with land and trade disputes plagued much of the Malay kingdoms in Peninsula Malaysia. The Malay Sultans and elites would call upon the British in the Straits Settlements to intervene and provide peace and stability to their kingdoms. At first, the British adopted a non-interventionist policy, but later changed their stance as they saw a great opportunity to expand its influence beyond the Straits Settlements. Arguably, the most famous local dispute was that of the Malay state of Perak. Raja Abdullah, the heir apparent of the kingdom of Perak, wrote to the Governor of the Straits Settlement, Andrew Clarke, requesting aid in solving the succession crisis looming over the throne of Perak, and the local strife between rival Malay elites as well as frequent clashes between rival Chinese secret societies over tin mining rights. This eventually led to the signing of the Pangkor Treaty of 1874.

¹¹⁰ For more information on British colonial rule in Malaysia, see Rupert Emerson, *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968). Emerson's book, originally published in 1937, is largely considered to be the "father" of British Malayan studies. See also Barbara Andaya, and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982); and C.C. Eldridge, ed., *British Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

European white superiority. These “scientists” devised methodologies, such as measuring the shapes and sizes of skulls, to determine an entire people group’s position on an imagined racial hierarchy.¹¹¹

Although Darwin himself never sought to apply his theory beyond biology, Social Darwinism found much analytical purchase in the social sciences. This misapplication of Darwin contends that all human races progress and evolve from primitive to civilized cultures under the principles of “survival of the fittest.”¹¹² Natural selection was seen as a method of eliminating weak persons or groups. Letting nature run its course presented the best scenario for ultimately improving the race and weeding out society’s unworthy elements. Herbert Spencer’s “The Social Organism” (1860) compares society to a living organism and argues that society evolves and increases in complexity through an analogous process just as biological organisms evolve through the process of natural selection.¹¹³ Western technological advances placed European culture as the pinnacle of

¹¹¹ See for example, Andrew Bank, “Of ‘Native Skulls’ and ‘Noble Caucasians’: Phrenology in Colonial South Africa,” in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 22, no.3 (1996): 387-403; Martin Straum, *Labeling People: French Scholars on Society, and Race, and Empire, 1815-1848* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003); Stephen Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth Century Social Thought* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005); Paul Turnbull, “British Anatomists, Phrenologists and the Construction of the Aboriginal Race, c.1790-1830,” in *History Compass* 5, no.1 (2007): 26-50; and Allan Ardill, “Sociobiology, Racism and Australian Colonisation,” in *Griffith Law Review* 18, no.1 (2009): 82-113.

¹¹² Contrary to popular belief, this term was not coined by Darwin himself, but by Herbert Spencer. However, it was an American economist that brought Social Darwinism and many of its connotations to the forefront. Richard Hofstadter’s *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) favors economic reform over free-market capitalism, which he blames as predicated by Darwinist evolutionary thought.

¹¹³ Spencer’s essay was first published in *The Westminster Review* in January 1860, now reprinted in Herbert Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political, Speculative*, 3 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1891). Social Darwinism, and later eugenics were extremely popular among European scientists in the 1800s such as Thomas Malthus and Francis Galton. For an excellent resource on the use and meaning of Social Darwinism, see Geoffrey M. Hodgson, “Social Darwinism in Anglophone Academic Journals: A Contribution to the History of the Term,” in *Journal of Historical Sociology* 17, no.4 (2004): 428-463. Also see Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in*

human socio-cultural evolution by virtue of Europe's "natural superiority" in the struggle for existence. According to Crawford Young, this evolutionary view of the human race offers:

the rationale for a racially stratified view of evolution based on an ethnocentric colonial view of the subjugated nations who, with reference to their relative lack of western technology, were deemed more lowly. Europeans represented the highest point of evolution, diverse Asians and Indians fell in somewhere behind, and Africans brought up the rear.¹¹⁴

Social Darwinism legitimized Europe's conquest of non-European lands.¹¹⁵ Because different groups of people were perceived as less evolved, and therefore inferior, European powers justified the use of slave and indentured labor to work in their colonies.

Since European civilization self-identified as superior to the rest of the world, it was Europe's duty to take up the White Man's Burden to civilize the world for the benefit of all humankind.¹¹⁶ This attitude permeated throughout the colonial enterprise.

European and American Thought: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Peter Dickens, *Social Darwinism: Linking Evolutionary Thought to Social Theory* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000); John Jackson Jr., and Nadine Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004); and Debbie Challis, *The Archeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). Ironically, Darwin did not endorse this theory. See Adrian Desmond, and James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause: How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin's Views on Human Evolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

¹¹⁴ Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 50.

¹¹⁵ See for example, Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought, 1895-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960); James Morris, *Pax Britannica: The Climax of an Empire* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968); C.C. Eldridge, ed., *British Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1984); John Mackenzie, ed., *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986); and Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For an alternative view, see Paul Crook, "Social Darwinism and British 'New Imperialism': Second Thoughts," in *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 3, no.1 (1998): 1-16.

¹¹⁶ See for example, Philip Curtin, "Scientific Racism and the British Theory of Empire," in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2 (1960): 40-50; Reginald Horsman, "Origins of Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37 (1976): 387-410; Robert

Colonialism inflicts damage on the colonized as it alters, exacerbates, and distorts the pre-existing socio-economic structures, social relations, and identities of the colonies. Armed with a sense of racial superiority, the British established their rule in Malaysia by conducting practices and implementing policies that permanently changed the country's ethnic and political landscape.

The Colonial Census

One of the ways European powers controlled their colonial subjects is through categorization and enumeration. Benedict Anderson's seminal work, *Imagined Communities* argues that nineteenth century colonial powers utilized the census, the map, and the museum as tools to foster belonging by consolidating early ideas about the nation and its citizens. Through the census, the state identified, enumerated, and classified people and "profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion – the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry."¹¹⁷ This in turn encouraged people to view the world as composed of distinct groups. Let me return to Bourdieu once again to frame this analysis. As he reminds us in *Language and Symbolic Power*, "by structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of the world, and does so all the more significantly the more widely it is recognized, i.e.

Huttenback, *Racism and Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); and Paul Rich, *Racism and Empire in British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). It is also worth mentioning that the linking of racist ideology with colonialism has been explored by various postcolonial scholars, notwithstanding Fanon and Césaire whom I have already described in the previous chapter.

¹¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1996), 168.

authorized.”¹¹⁸ Bourdieu recognizes the power to create social realities through the use of words. These practices create *habitus*, a socially inscribed space that defines a person’s sense of place in the world that is enduring and transferrable from one context to another over time. In Malaysia’s case, the census categorized the country’s diverse ethnic groups along rigid boundaries over time. David Goldberg similarly argues that the census is “an exercise in social naming, in nominating into existence.”¹¹⁹ He further states that “the census reflects the racializing categories of social formation that it nevertheless at once reifies, which it reproduces as it creates and cements as it naturalizes. The process of objectified nomination thus fixes (as least temporarily and tenuously) what are at best racial fabrications.”¹²⁰

The British solidified bounded ethnic identities among the Malays, Chinese, and Indians – usually without any input from the colonized groups.¹²¹ More than just a statistical exercise, the data from censuses possesses the power to construct or eliminate

¹¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 105.

¹¹⁹ David Goldberg, *Racial Subjects: Writing on Race in America* (Routledge: New York, 1997), 29.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 34.

¹²¹ For examples of census taking in other parts of the British Empire, see N.G. Barrier, ed. *The Census in British India: New Perspectives* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981); Bernard Cohn, “The Census and Objectification in South Asia,” in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 224-254; Arjun Appadurai, “Number in the Colonial Imagination,” in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, edited by Carol A. Breckenridge, and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 314-339; Satish Kumar, “The Census and Women’s Work in Rangoon, 1872-1931,” in *Journal of Historical Geography* 32, no.2 (2006): 377-397; A.J. Christopher, “The Quest for a Census of the British Empire c.1840-1940,” in *Journal of Historical Geography* 34, no.2 (2008): 268-285; Karl Ittman, Dennis Cordell, and Gregory Maddox, eds., *The Demographics of Empire: The Colonial Order and the Creation of Knowledge* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010); and Kevin Walby, and Michael Haan, “Caste Confusion and Census Enumeration in Colonial India, 1871-1921,” in *Historie Sociale/Social History* 45, no.90 (2012): 301-318.

pre-existing categories by which people understand sameness and difference.¹²² I am not saying that ethnic and cultural differences did not exist, nor am I suggesting that these differences were solely the invention of the colonial powers. Certainly, pre-colonial censuses did exist, but they lacked what Anderson argues, any “systematic quantification.”¹²³ Pre-colonial censuses did not exude the totalizing power that colonial authorities possessed.¹²⁴ As James Scott states, “state officials can make their categories stick and impose their simplifications.”¹²⁵

Colonial Malaysia provides an excellent example of how the British divided people-groups into separable racial categories and identities. In devising these categories, census-takers used pre-existing cultural and geographical markers to categorize the colonial subjects. Charles Hirschman suggests that colonial officials had to formulate a set of mutually exclusive and exhaustive ethnic categories to classify the population: “There were no precedents from earlier reports to follow... the categories of

¹²² See for example, Marianne Ferme, “The Violence of Numbers: Concerns, Competition and the Negotiation of Disputes in Sierra Leone,” in *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 38, no.150-152 (1988): 555–580; Talal Asad, “Ethnographic Representation, Statistics and Modern Power,” in *Social Research* 61, no.1(1994): 55-88; and David Kertzer, and Dominique Arel, eds., *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹²³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 168.

¹²⁴ One of things that occurred with the census in the nineteenth century was a shift in its logic. The pre-colonial census was more of an instrument of taxation before becoming an instrument of knowledge and discipline. For examples of pre-colonial census, see Richard Saumarez Smith, “Rule-by-Records and Rule-by-Reports: Complementary Aspects of the British Imperial Rule of Law,” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 19 (1985): 153-176. Elsewhere, Norbert Peabody suggests that colonial authorities often used indigenous enumeration records about which the colonials were only dimly aware of. Nevertheless, he stops short of making a direct correlation between pre-colonial and colonial forms of knowledge. See Norbert Peabody, “Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India,” in *Comparative Study in Society and History* 43, no.4 (2001): 819-850.

¹²⁵ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 81.

classification had to be ‘invented’ from experience and common knowledge.”¹²⁶ He argues that categories such as Malay, Chinese, and Indian are much broader than they are socially understood.¹²⁷ This reflects the British colonial government’s lack of awareness in the existence of diversity among the people living in Malaysia had in turn created categories of simplification and division, consciously or not, as a means of control.

Echoing Hirschman’s assessment, Anderson’s analysis of the Indonesian colonial census shows that local Indonesian natives did not recognize themselves along the labels generated by colonial census-takers.¹²⁸ This shows how colonial attempts to classify subjective identities are void of native involvement. This is the significant difference between European and colonial census practices. While Euro-Western enumeration categories involving nationality and language were negotiated between the state and the social groups, the colonial powers paid no attention to their colonized subjects.¹²⁹

The colonial censuses of 1871, 1891, 1911, and 1931 show how diverse categories of people in Malaysia became grouped together under the general headings of “Europeans,” “Malays,” “Chinese,” and “Indians.”¹³⁰ For example, the 1871 Census incorporated people groups from as far as the Philippines (“Manilamen”) as part of the

¹²⁶ Charles Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications,” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no.3 (1987): 561.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 567.

¹²⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 165-166.

¹²⁹ See for example, Dennis Newman, “The Census of Population in Britain,” in *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series D (The Statistician)* 20, no.2 (1971): 3-14; and I.F. Clarke, “From Space to Time: Taking the Measure of Society,” in *Futures* 23, no.2 (1991): 179-188.

¹³⁰ For detailed descriptions of British census records, I utilized to Hirschman’s Appendix section in his article, “The Meaning and Measurement,” 571-578 for reference.

Malay race.¹³¹ Later in the 1911 Federated Malay States Census, the category of “Malay” was extended to other groups such as the Javanese, Achinese, and Bugis. Strangely, all three groups originated from the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Java which was part of the Dutch colony; Anderson points out that surely these groups were categorized under a different enumeration rubric by Dutch colonial census takers.¹³² As for the Chinese immigrant community in Malaysia, the 1911 Straits Settlements Census subsumed the “Straits-born” and “China-born” under the general heading of “Chinese.”¹³³ The census left little room for people with belonging in multiple ethnic categories such as the *peranakan* Chinese. To the eyes of the colonial census takers, either they were Malay, Chinese, or Indian. Consequently, the relatively porous pre-colonial boundaries of ethnic cooperation and mutual tolerance were written off by the colonial census. This is perhaps the most damaging feature of the colonial census. In its capacity to erase the legacy of cultural borrowing and hybrid identities in pre-colonial times, Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya observe that “the British contributed to the hardening of ethnic divisions which was to plague all subsequent governments of Malaya/Malaysia.”¹³⁴

It is important to understand that undergirding the colonial census are European perceptions of racial supremacy. Because colonialism is justified through ordering and ranking races along a hierarchy of races, the British restructured Malaysian society through the logic of an ethnically-based communal society that separated the various

¹³¹ Ibid., 571-572.

¹³² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 165.

¹³³ Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement,” 573.

¹³⁴ Andaya, and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 204.

ethnic communities according to “higher” and “lower” races, each with different economic functions. The Malays were seen as a primarily agrarian people who were economically backward and therefore needed the protection of the colonial authorities. Meanwhile, the Chinese and Indians who were brought to the colony in large numbers were meant to serve different functions within the colonial economy. It is through these reified categories that justified Charles Warnford-Lock, a colonial mining officer in declaring, “by nature, the Malay is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief and the Indian is a drunkard. Yet each, in his special class of work, is both cheap and efficient, when properly supervised.”¹³⁵ It is through this categorization of colonial Malaysia’s ethnic groups that an uneven and racially segregated colonial economy appeared.

Malaysia presents a classic example of what John Furnivall calls a plural society. Based on his observations of colonial Burma and Indonesia in the 1940s, he argues that plural societies are the creation of colonial policies that fostered migration of laborers according to economic dictates. The result of this is the creation of a society that co-exists side by side, but is divided along racial and religious lines.¹³⁶ Echoing Furnivall,

¹³⁵ Charles Wanford-Lock, *Mining in Malaya for Gold and Tin* (London: Crowther and Goodman, 1907), 31-32.

¹³⁶ John Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 304. For an analysis of Malaysia’s plural society, see Maurice Freedman, “The Growth of a Plural Society in Malaysia,” in *Pacific Affairs* 33, no.2 (1960): 158-168; Judith Nagata, ed., *Pluralism in Malaysia: Myth and Reality: A Symposium on Singapore and Malaysia* (Leiden: Brill, 1975); and Robert Hefner, ed., *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001). Furnivall’s theory is criticized for being too overdrawn. In particular, Charles Coppel argues that Furnivall’s assessment of the plural society of colonial Indonesia is too “exaggerated” and “misleading.” He warns that one should not view the relationship between the various ethnic groups in the colony as static. Of course, I agree that the ethnic makeup of colonial Malaysia is more fluid than the census takers would like it to be. Even though his work is dated, Furnivall accurately captures how ethnicity, as a reified concept, continues to play a fundamental part in structuring postcolonial societies in Southeast Asia. For more information See Charles Coppel, “Revisiting Furnivall’s ‘Plural Society’: Colonial Java as a Mestizo Society?” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20, no.3 (1997): 562-579.

Malaysian social anthropologist Zawawi Ibrahim contends that Malaysia has always been a plural society, even before the arrival of the British. This is especially true during the Melaka Sultanate where there was a great deal of cultural mobility, as loose boundaries of marriages and inter-ethnic cooperation between Chinese and Malay. But with the arrival of British colonialism, “the subsequent elaborations by colonialism upon this ‘initial pluralism’... gave rise to the ethnicism and competing ethnicities currently inherited by the modern Malaysian nation-state.”¹³⁷ Through the infamous divide and rule policy, these “ethnicism” and “competing ethnicities” give rise to communal and reified identities.¹³⁸

Divide and Rule

Due to the high labor requirement to work in tin mines and rubber plantations, the British colonial government imported Indian and Chinese laborers to the colony. From the start, the British discouraged the Malays from participating in the economic activities

¹³⁷ Zawawi Ibrahim, “Globalization and National Identity: Managing Ethnicity and Cultural Pluralism in Malaysia,” in *Growth and Governance in Asia*, edited by Yoichiro Sato (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004), 115-116.

¹³⁸ This is a complex, yet fascinating subject of study, and one that is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight how contemporary Malaysia’s political, and economic institutions and problems are rooted in the colonial experience. This is a politically charged subject, and politicians and historians alike have constantly debated on this subject. While acknowledging that such a policy existed in colonial Malaysia, the failure of contemporary Malaysian historians, especially among those who are pro-government, is in making the linkages with contemporary Malaysia’s political, social, and economic arrangement with its colonial legacy. I will try to highlight this as succinctly as possible. For more information on the formation of the “divide and rule” policy in colonial Malaya, see Collin Abraham’s various publications such as *Divide and Rule: The Roots of Race Relations in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 1997), and *The Naked Social Order: The Roots of Racial Polarisation in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 2003). Also, see Charles Hirschman, “The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology,” *Sociological Forum* 1 (1987): 330-361; Wu Yin Hua, *Class and Communalism in Malaysia* (London: Zed Books, 1983); and Raymond Lee, ed. *Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Malaysia* (De Kalb: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1986).

of the colony. Robert Hefner, an anthropologist specializing in Southeast Asian Muslim culture, contends that the price of teaching the Malays the tools of the trade was “too high” politically, and the British would pursue an appeasement policy by not interfering with their religion and culture.¹³⁹ British policy towards the Malays was to conserve the traditional Malay structure. In dealing with the Malays, the British knew that the Malay rulers commanded the loyalty of the Malay population. To the Malay peasantry, “government was the sole business of the Sultan and his chiefs... A commoner’s duty was to carry out commands, or ‘*Titah*’ of the Sultan at all costs.”¹⁴⁰ In order to keep the Malay population in check, all they had to do was to make sure that they preserved the relationship between the Malay aristocracy and their Malay subjects. The British symbolically acknowledged the Malay rulers’ sovereignty over each state, whose rule encompassed matters relating to the Malay tradition such as Malay customs and Islam. The British provided the rulers with “bureaucratic and legal machinery to implement their directives in a more systematic and invasive manner than ever before in Malay history.”¹⁴¹

Concurrently, the British selected a small group of Malays from aristocratic families and trained them as low-level bureaucrats to help run the colony’s administrative affairs. B.N. Cham suggests that this pro-Malay policy was designed to emphasize

¹³⁹ For more information, see Robert Hefner, “Introduction: Multiculturalism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia,” in *The Politics of Multiculturalism*, 1-58.

¹⁴⁰ Radin Soenarno, “Malay Nationalism, 1896-1941,” in *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 1, no.1 (1960): 1.

¹⁴¹ Hefner, “Introduction,” 16.

Malays as the sole originators of the region, and not the non-Malay community.¹⁴² They set up schools designated for elite Malay boys where they received a western education.¹⁴³ This was not a gesture of British benevolence towards the local populace. Rather, this new class of learned Malay elites functioned as arbiters between the local populace and colonial authorities. By creating this class, the British co-opted the Malay traditional elites and established a hierarchy where western-educated Malay elites would serve as the “vanguard” for the rest of the Malay populace. At the same time, the majority of the Malay population was dependent on this vanguard group for leadership and guidance.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² B.N. Cham, “Colonialism and Communalism in Malaysia,” in *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 7, no.2 (1977): 187.

¹⁴³ In Malaysia, schools such as the Malay College of Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) were created to fulfill this purpose. Today, the MCKK still retains this “prestige” bestowed by the British as it is known as an elite school for Malay boys. Thus, Malay education in colonial Malaysia became a source of social maintenance rather than social mobility. For more on British education policy in colonial Malaysia, see Philip Loh Fook Seng, *Seeds of Separation: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975); Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policy towards the Malays, 1875-1906* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975); and Keith Watson, “Rulers and Ruled: Racial Perceptions, Curriculum and Schooling in Colonial Malaya and Singapore,” in *The Imperial Curriculum: Racial Images and Education in the British Colonial Experience*, edited by J.A. Mangan (New York: Routledge, 1993). This was a widespread practice throughout the British Empire. In India, the British trained an entire group of Indian civil servants aimed at extracting maximum revenues from the local Indians. Only upper caste (mainly Brahmins) members of society were qualified to receive such education and training. For an overview of the British colonial educational policies, and in other areas, see Frederick James Clatworthy, *The Formulation of British Colonial Education Policy, 1923-1948* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, School of Education, 1971); Stephen J. Ball, “Imperialism, Social Control and the Colonial Curriculum in Africa,” in *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 15, no.3 (1983): 237-263; Clive Whitehead, *Colonial Educators: The British Indian and Colonial Education Service* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003); and Clive Whitehead, “The Medium of Instruction in British Colonial Education: A Case of Cultural Imperialism or Enlightened Paternalism?,” in *History of Education* 24 no.1 (1995): 1-15.

¹⁴⁴ Malay political scientist Farish Noor argues that this “cult of leadership” stems from feudal Southeast Asia’s (including Malaysia) tendency to elevate the *raja*, or king, into semi-divine status. The British were merely continuing this trend of placating the Malay rulers so that the local Malay populace becomes more manageable. In addition, he asserts that UMNO’s leadership and political rhetoric is a legacy of such “neo-feudal” thinking. For more information, see Farish A. Noor, *What Your Teacher Didn’t Tell You: The Annex Lectures (Vol. 1)* (Petaling Jaya: Matahari Books, 2009), 93-133.

The divide and rule policy constructed racial difference and distinctiveness within a hierarchical ordering of superior and inferior races. This formed the ideological basis for the maintenance of British colonial rule in Malaysia. Even though the British recognized the status of Malays as the original people of the country, they also believed that the Malays were lazy and docile, and thus required supervision from their superior colonial masters. Syed Hussein Alatas' *The Myth of the Lazy Native* argues that the bountiful Malaysian environment has conditioned the Malays against a disciplined work ethic, which gave birth to the stereotype of the "lazy" and docile Malay.¹⁴⁵ Unlike the shrewd Chinese, the British did not believe that the Malays possessed the capability to participate in the economic affairs of the Empire. Writing on his adventures and observations in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, British naturalist Alfred Wallace observes in *The Malay Archipelago* (1869) that with regards to the Malays, "the intellect of the Malay race seems rather deficient. They are incapable of anything beyond the simplest combination of ideas and have little taste or energy for the acquirement of knowledge."¹⁴⁶ With such projections, the British ultimately kept the Malay population away from colonial economic activity.¹⁴⁷ Since the Malays were not ambitious and did

¹⁴⁵ See Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 1977). See also Paul Kratoska, *Honourable Intentions: Talks on the British Empire in South-East Asia Delivered at the Royal Colonial Institute, 1874-1928* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983). This edited volume collects papers presented by various British imperialists and administrators on the state of the British Empire in the 1800s and early 1900s. Prominent administrators in colonial Malaya such as Frank Swettenham, Hugh Low, and George Maxwell all attest to the prevailing ideology of paternalism, and European superiority towards their colonized, non-white subjects.

¹⁴⁶ Alfred Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orang-Utan and the Bird of Paradise; A Narrative of Travel, with Studies of Man and Nature* (London: Electric Book Company, 1869), 541.

¹⁴⁷ To be sure, the British tried to recruit the Malays to work in tin mines and rubber plantations. But the Malays refused to participate in the wage labor, mainly the colonial economy was not created for

not possess the work ethic to labor in the tin mines and rubber estates, the British doubted that the Malays could compete with the other ethnic groups. As such, they had to be taken care of. While trying to maximize economic output from their territories, the British simultaneously made sure that each group was kept apart from each other.¹⁴⁸

The British segregated the ethnic communities in colonial Malaysia along economic “trades.”¹⁴⁹ Mines and plantations became exclusively served by Chinese and Indian laborers. At the same time, the British discouraged the Chinese and Indian from entering into subsistence farming for fear that this would encroach on the Malays. For example, the British introduced the Malay Reservations Enactment in 1913 as a means to prevent sale of Malay rural land and Malay-reserved land to non-Malays.¹⁵⁰ The segregated recruitment policy also means that the British could easily manipulate the

domestic consumption. Further, the Malays were part of a feudal system with the Malay rulers; they saw no incentives to participate in wage labor. The Malays’ refusal to participate in the colonial economy almost certainly led to the British stereotyping of the lazy and unambitious Malays. See Hirschman, “Making of Race;” and Lim, “Ethnic and Class Relations.”

¹⁴⁸ I should also note that this was standard practice throughout the British Empire which was in marked contrast with the French colonial policy of assimilation. See Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); Robert Miles, *Racism and Migrant Labour* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); A.J. Christopher, “‘Divide and Rule’: The Impress of British Separation Policies,” in *Area* 20, no.3 (1988): 233-240; H.L. Wesseling, *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880-1914*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (Westport: Praeger, 1996); and Gary McGee, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World c.1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁴⁹ See A.J. Stockwell, “The White Man’s Burden and Brown Humanity: Colonialism and Ethnicity in British Malaya,” in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 10, no1 (1982): 59-62.

¹⁵⁰ Cheah Boon Kheng, “Politics: Malaysian Political Development from Colonial Rule to Mahathir,” in *The Shaping of Malaysia*, edited by Amarjit Kaur, and Ian Metcalfe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 101.

immigrant labor community and ensured that workers were not easily assimilated or readily accepted by the local inhabitants.¹⁵¹

The Chinese Immigrant Community

The practice of employing immigrant labor to work in the colonies was standard procedure throughout the British Empire.¹⁵² For the Chinese, the majority of the new immigrants were young men of poor and uneducated rural peasants, farmers and craftsmen.¹⁵³ The high demand for immigrant labor, coupled with worsening famine and overpopulation in China, resulted in a resurgence of Chinese emigration to Malaysia.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ See Lim Teck Gee, "British Colonial Administration and the 'Ethnic Division of Labor' in Malaya," in *Kajian Malaysia* 2 (1984): 28-66. Nevertheless, we should not assume that this division of labor was rigid. Rather, there were some pockets of inter-ethnic cooperation and mobility within the races. See Paul Kratoska, "Rice Cultivation and the Ethnic Division of Labor in British Malaya," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24 (1982): 280-314.

¹⁵² For other colonial contexts, see Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Kay Saunders, ed., *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Dharmapriya Wesumperuma, *Indian Immigrant Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka: A Historical Perspective, 1880-1910* (Kelayina: Vidyalankara Press, 1986); Mary Somers Heidhues, *Bangka Tim and Mentok Pepper: Chinese Settlement in an Indonesian Island* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1992); Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996); Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Roland Wenzlhuemmer, *From Coffee to Tea Cultivation in Ceylon, 1880-1900: An Economic and Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); and Clare Anderson, "Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century," in *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 30, no.1 (2009): 93-109.

¹⁵³ There were strong linguistic differences and sense of regional identities infused among this new crop of immigrant Chinese community. To identify them as "Chinese" is a misnomer since many of the new immigrants would not know what a "Chinese" is. On the contrary, many of them would identify themselves along dialect and regional lines. Among the prominent dialect groups that came to Malaya were Cantonese, Fujianese, Hokkiens, and Hakkas from southeastern China. This is apparent with the proliferation of various clan associations/labor agencies. For more information, see Tan, "Socio-cultural Diversities and Identities," 37-70.

¹⁵⁴ The Qing government did not sanction this "second wave" of migration in the 1800s. Qing decrees in the 1700s which forbid Chinese emigration and overseas trade were intended to prevent remnant

There were two types of Chinese migration to Malaysia: kinship-based immigration and credit-ticket immigration. Under kinship-based immigration, the Chinese traveling to Malaysia relied on their relationships with their blood relatives to help make the transition to a new environment. Once they established a foothold in Malaysia, they would in turn recruit their kin and relatives to help them with their business operations. The other system, the credit-ticket immigration, became the primary pattern of Chinese emigration to Malaysia.¹⁵⁵ Under the credit-ticket system, the Chinese entered into a contractual agreement (written or verbal) with labor agencies or junk captains. In exchange for advance passage to Malaysia, immigrants were required to work for their sponsors to pay off their debt upon arrival. Once they repaid their debt or fulfilled their contractual obligations, they were free to choose their own employment.

The uneducated Chinese laborers posed little threat to the British colonial government since they had little political purchase away from their homeland.¹⁵⁶ They were cheap, disposable, and easy to control; at the first sign of trouble, the British could deport them back to China. Labor inspectorates/agencies and protectorates also ensured that the Chinese immigrants were held in check while ensuring the free flow of Chinese migration around the colony. According to Amarjit Kaur, these agencies functioned as “screening bodies” to identify the “troublemakers.” Through the practice of medical

supporters of the Ming Dynasty from establishing bases overseas. The Qing Dynasty considered Chinese emigration as an act of disloyalty. These decrees were largely ignored as the situation in China worsened in the late 1800s. Chinese migration to Southeast Asia also coincided with Chinese influx to the United States before the United States government banned further migrations in 1882. Eventually, the imperial Chinese government lifted this ban in 1893. For more information, see Geoffrey Liu, *The Right to Leave and Return and Chinese Migration Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

¹⁵⁵ Yen, “Historical Background,” 2.

¹⁵⁶ Amarjit Kaur, *Wage Labour in Southeast Asia since 1840: Globalization, the International Division of Labour and Labour Transformations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 38.

screenings, these labor agencies would identify politically undesirable laborers and deport them.¹⁵⁷ The Chinese were also barred from participating in the administrative affairs of the colony, a privilege that was only conferred to the Malays. Left to fend for themselves, the Chinese established religious organizations, “benevolent” societies, and secret societies to help the Chinese immigrant community. The British tolerated these institutions, provided that they did not upset the peace and daily flow of the colonial administration.¹⁵⁸

These organizations assisted the Chinese in securing employment, offering protection, and organizing social/religious events. Yet, they also functioned as a form of control that ensured Chinese segregation from other ethnic groups. For example, in the tin-mining industry, the Chinese were organized through the *kongsi*, an organizing system based on clan associations which combined dialect, regional, and occupational groupings.¹⁵⁹ They simultaneously functioned as a means of social control and social solidarity among the Chinese immigrant community.¹⁶⁰ These *kongsis* have their own

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 142 This was also a common practice in colonial Indo-China. See Daniel Valentine, Henry Bernstein, and Tom Brass, eds., *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 1992).

¹⁵⁸ Some “benevolent societies” only assisted those who came from the same clan/dialect groups or geographical region. Secret societies (some of which were religiously based) also proliferated which drew suspicions from British authorities. See Leon Comber, *Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Survey of the Triad Society, 1800-1900* (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1959); Wilfred Blythe, *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969); Mak Lau Fong, *The Sociology of Secret Societies: A Study of Chinese Secret Societies in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1981); and David Ownby, and Mary Somers Heidhues, eds., “Secret Societies” *Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1993).

¹⁵⁹ Carl Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore 1800-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 11.

¹⁶⁰ Yen Ching-Hwang, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), 117-118.

codes of conduct which demanded the loyalties of its members. These organizations also offered a sense of security and identity for the Chinese community through clan ties and kinship links.

The Malays, protected by the British and separated from the colonial economic enterprise, and the Chinese, clustered around clan-based organizations, represent two very different systems of organization during a crucial period of Malaysian history. Wang Gungwu summarizes:

By the time the Europeans were ready to expand in the 19th century in search of markets and raw materials and to introduce new administrative structures to help them get what they wanted, they had molded the pluralist heritage of the region to a shape that suited their needs. It was no longer an amorphous open pluralism, but one that recognized priorities (for example, entrepreneurial and technical over farming skills) and emphasizes new hierarchies that could be systematically manipulated (for example, religious and ethnic differences, new status and wealth differences, and ultimately class differences)...The earlier form of cultural pluralism was now placed in a new cultural framework - a modern secular culture based on control, efficiency, profitability, and accountability.¹⁶¹

This new framework created an aura of suspicion between the Malays and the Chinese as these two ethnic groups did not interact with each other. According to William George Maxwell, a high ranking colonial officer, the prohibition against the participation of non-Malay Asians in the colonial administration came directly from the British themselves:

From the very earliest days of British protection, the [Malay] Rulers have welcomed Chinese communities as members of their State Councils, and have paid the greatest deference to their opinions and advice... The policy of keeping non-Malayans out of the administration owes its inception to British officials, not to the Rulers.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Wang Gungwu, "Continuities in Island Southeast Asia," in *Reinventing Malaysia: Reflections on its Past and Future*, edited by Jomo K. Sundaram (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001), 26.

¹⁶² William George Maxwell, "The Mixed Communities of Malaya," in *British Malaya* (February 1943): 118.

The British did not recognize the Chinese immigrant labor as “citizens” of the land.¹⁶³ They had assumed that they were merely sojourners who would eventually return to their homeland once they have accumulated enough wealth. However, many chose to remain, since there were better opportunities in Malaysia than in China. The increased presence of women in Malaysia also contributed to the transformation of the Chinese community from a predominantly male transient community into a more settled and permanent society.¹⁶⁴ The 1931 Malayan Census showed a significantly increasing proportion of permanent immigrant population, revealing that nearly a third of the Chinese population had been born in Malaysia.¹⁶⁵

Although the Chinese faced exploitation and harsh working conditions in colonial Malaysia, a large proportion of workers later managed to become self-sufficient.

Economic historian Wong Lin Ken observed that by the late 1880s, there was:

an increase in the number of [Chinese] immigrants who could pay their own passages, either because they were helped by friends and relatives who had already made some money from the tin mines or elsewhere, or because they were Chinese laborers returning to the Straits to make more money.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Kaur, *Wage Labour*, 38.

¹⁶⁴ Despite two immigration ordinances limiting Chinese male (but not female) immigration in 1928 and 1933, the Chinese population in Malaysia grew rapidly, thanks to the changing male-female ratio. Previously, Chinese imperial laws and customs prohibited women from immigrating to Malaysia. Chinese traditions dictated that women must remain in China to care for their in-laws while their husbands were away overseas. With the founding of the Chinese Republic however, Qing laws became obsolete, paving the way for increased female immigration to Malaysia. For more information, see Yen, “Historical Background,” 28.

¹⁶⁵ C.A. Vieland, *British Malaya, A Report on the 1931 Census*, (London: Crown Agents, 1932), 69.

¹⁶⁶ Wong Lin Ken, *Malayan Tin Industry to 1914* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965), 66-67.

British attitudes toward the Chinese were of begrudging admiration. Frank Swettenham, an accomplished colonial officer in Malaysia, who, in spite of his interests in the customs and people of the country, contends that:

The Chinese have, under direction, made the Protected States what they are. They are the bees who suck honey from every profitable undertaking... It is almost hopeless to expect to make friends with a Chinaman, and it is, for a Government officer, an object that is not very desirable to attain. The Chinese, at least that class of them met with in Malaya, do not understand being treated as equals; they only realize two positions – the giving and receiving of orders; they are the easiest people to govern in the East for a man of determination, but they must know their master, as he must know them... Under the conditions, the Chinese are the bone and sinew of the Malay States. They are the labourers, the miners, the principal shopkeepers, the contractors, the capitalists, the holders of the revenue farms, the contributors of almost the whole of the revenue: we cannot do without them.¹⁶⁷

We should not be surprised by Swettenham's assessment of the Chinese. Even after acknowledging their contributions to the colonial economy, the British continued to view the Chinese as penurious. Similarly, Hugh Clifford, the British Resident to the Sultan of Pahang and a contemporary of Swettenham, echoes the prevalent European view of the Chinese. Presenting a paper at the Royal Colonial Institute on Great Britain's work in the Malaysian colony in 1889, Clifford observes:

The Chinese have toiled in the Peninsula for many centuries... These people, who surely are the most thrifty and industrious of mankind, love money for money's sake, love a gamble, such as mining affords, and above all, love complete security for life and property probably because the latter is a thing which they so rarely find in their own distracted country... A constant stream of immigration has set towards these States from the over-crowded districts of Southern China, and the yellow portion of the inhabitants of Malaya threatens shortly to outnumber the brown.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Frank Swettenham, *The Real Malay: Pen Pictures* (London: John Lane, 1900), 38-40.

¹⁶⁸ Hugh Clifford, "Life in the Malay Peninsula: As it was and is," in Kratoska, ed., *Honourable Mentions*, 247.

Clifford's view of the Chinese also helps us illuminate another important point. He was concerned that the influx of Chinese labor to Malaysia would threaten to outnumber the local Malay population. It might only be a matter of time before the Malays would start resenting the presence of foreigners in their country. Indeed, the question of non-Malay presence became the single pressing issue among Malays as the Malaysia began its decolonization process and moved towards independence.

What I have shown in this section is that the mass influx of workers coming from India and China to Malaysia to fuel the colonial economy had significantly altered the ethnic, economic, and social landscape of the region. This colonial plural society is based on ethnic segregation. British colonial policies, predicated by European theories of racial superiority, ordered and cemented the ethnic groups in Malaysia into separate "trades" and along essentialist categories. By assigning different ethnic groups along different trades based on the racial superiority, the British reified the distinction between the Malays and non-Malay immigrant groups.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ It is worth mentioning that on the eve of World War II, there were rumblings of Malay nationalism in colonial Malaysia. A group of Islamic modernist Malay elites, calling themselves the *Kaum Muda*, (translated as "Young Faction") having been educated in Egypt's Al-Azhar University, and influenced by the nationalist movements in Turkey and Egypt in the early 1900s, were beginning to assert their political influence. They called for an end of British colonialism and non-Malay immigration and demanded inclusion into the economic process to improve Malay livelihood. Given these rising tensions, the situation has yet to reach a tipping point. This is because politics in colonial Malaysia remained fragmented along ethnic lines. Each ethnic group in Malaysia was more concerned with the political happenings of their respective homelands. The overwhelming success of British divide and rule also contributed to the surprisingly low communal conflict prior to the Japanese occupation of Malaysia. By keeping the three main ethnic groups apart from each other, the British effectively limited the room for social conflict *in addition* to social change. See William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Gordon P. Means, "The Role of Islam in the Political Development of Malaysia," in *Comparative Politics* 1, no.2 (1969): 264-284; Khoo Kay Kim, "Malay Society 1874-1920s," in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no.2 (1974): 179-198; Khoo Kay Kim, "Sino-Malaya Relations in Peninsular Malaysia before 1942," in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no.1 (1981): 93-107; and Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Malay Anti-Colonialism in British Malaya: A Re-appraisal of Independence Fighters of Peninsular Malaysia," in *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 42, no.5 (2007): 371-398.

The “Historic Bargain” and Independence

The years before independence (1945-1957) were a tumultuous time for the Chinese in Malaysia as more and more became permanent residents of their adopted homeland.¹⁷⁰ One of the major roadblocks to an independent Malaysia was solving the status of the Chinese and Indian immigrant community. Where did their loyalties lie? How will they function in an independent Malaysia? In this section, I briefly narrate the complex maneuvering of Malaysia’s local elites in negotiating for independence from the British. Again, this narrative will not cover the full extent of this very complicated and complex political process. Rather, I want to show how the independence movement is predicated by an internalized the logic of bounded ethnic differences which then produced a communal outlook among the Chinese and Malays.

In the aftermath of World War II, the British Empire’s efforts to reform the colony under the Malayan Union in 1946 were met with Malay protests. Under the Malayan Union, the British streamlined the governance of their colony, abolished the old Resident system, and transferred the Malay rulers’ powers (except for religious matters) to the British governor who would rule directly under the British Crown. Further, the Malayan Union would grant equal rights and citizenship to all residents of the colony who successfully applied for it. The British had hoped that the Malayan Union would foster unity and loyalty towards a new centralized state under British rule.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Wang Gungwu, *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 88-92.

¹⁷¹ Cheah Boon Kheng, *The Making of Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 13. See also Sah-Hadiyatan Ismail, “Second Colonial Occupation’: The United States and British Malaya 1945-1949,” in *Asian Culture and History* 4, no.1 (2012): 29-40.

The British proposal to grant equal citizenship for all residents in Malaysia, regardless of ethnicity, angered the Malay population. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO), a party founded by Malay aristocrat Onn Jaafar, decried this act as evidence of further weakening of Malays in Malaysia.¹⁷² After a series of boycotts and protests, the British relented. They abolished the Malayan Union and replaced it with the Federation of Malaya in 1948. According to T.N. Harper, “Britain sought to break down the divisions of a plural society, and create an integrated economic and political entity, bound together by shared allegiance, a common culture and the obligations of an active citizenship.”¹⁷³ This failed because the Malays were not willing to accept non-Malays as their equals.

With this act, UMNO successfully forced the British to grant citizenship for the Malays by virtue of their special place in Malaysia. The Federation tightened non-Malay immigration, restricted non-Malay citizenship, and recognized the special rights and privileges of the Malays. The rights and privileges of the Malays became encapsulated under the phrase *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). The formation of the Federation of Malaya was very much an initiative spearheaded by Malay elites, UMNO, and the British Empire as non-Malay grievances and suggestions were not taken into

¹⁷² It is worth mentioning that UMNO, as a political party, is mainly made up of elite and educated Malays, who themselves ascribed to conservative and royalist politics. Political scientist Chandra Muzaffar observes that UMNO’s leaders and governing style is very much determined by Malay elites, and involves around the concepts loyalty, and of the protector (i.e. UMNO) and the protected. Onn Jaafar’s successor, and ultimately the first Prime Minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman was of royal blood, solidifying from the outset, that UMNO was, and remains an elite-party steeped in royalist worldviews. See Chandra Muzaffar, *Protector? An Analysis of the Concept and Practice of Loyalty in Leader-led Relationships within Malay Society* (Penang: Aliran Press Publications, 1979).

¹⁷³ Harper, *The End of Empire*, 358.

consideration.¹⁷⁴ In effect, the Federation of Malaya solidified among the Malays that Malaysia was the “land of the Malays” and turned many Chinese in Malaysia into stateless aliens due to an unclear and biased citizenship policy that privileged the Malays.¹⁷⁵ Tunku Abdul Rahman (hereafter, the Tunku), a western-educated Malay prince who replaced Onn Jaafar as the president of UMNO, declared in 1952 that “Malaya is for the Malays and it should not be governed by a mixture of races.”¹⁷⁶ Curiously, Onn Jaafar left UMNO after he unsuccessfully tried to extend UMNO’s party membership to non-Malays.

However, one of Britain’s pre-requisite for an independent Malaysia was inter-racial unity and co-operation among the various ethnic groups in the country.¹⁷⁷ The country’s elites from various ethnic groups hatched a peculiar solution. The Malays, led by UMNO, needed the support of the Chinese and Indians; they needed to strike a political bargain with the non-Malays. The Tunku, who earlier sought an exclusivist “Malay” Malaysia, needed to relax his stance if he was to persuade other groups to ally with UMNO. They found a partner in the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA). Founded in 1949, the MCA’s primary goal was to provide a political voice for the Chinese

¹⁷⁴ Yet, we must note that UMNO was certainly *not* the only Malay political organization that was fighting for independence. For example, the socialist leaning Malay Nationalist Party (MNP) were active during the events leading up to the formation of the Malayan Union in 1946. Ultimately, they were overshadowed by UMNO, and lost its influence as the crackdown on communist and left-leaning activities intensified. Interestingly, mainstream Malaysian history conveniently ignores leftist Malay contribution towards an independent Malaya. For more information, see Cheah Boon Kheng, *The Masked Comrades: A Study of the Communist United Front in Malaya, 1945-1948* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1979); and Hamid, “Malay Anti-Colonialism,” 371-398.

¹⁷⁵ Leo Suryadinata, “Government Policies towards the Ethnic Chinese: A Comparison between Indonesia and Malaysia,” in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 13, no.2 (1985): 18-19.

¹⁷⁶ “‘Malaya is for Malays,’ he says: Rahman Hits at Onn,” *Straits Times*, July 1, 1952, <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19520701-1.2.91.aspx> (accessed March 29 2013).

¹⁷⁷ Cheah Boon Kheng, *The Making of Malaysia*, 24.

community. The party's president, Tan Cheng Lock, recognized that an alliance with UMNO was the best route to safeguard Chinese interests and ensure the Chinese of a political future in an independent Malaya.¹⁷⁸ The MCA would appeal to both British authorities and UMNO Malay nationalists as a "moderate" movement who were willing to acquiesce to Malay interests in exchange for citizenship in a newly independent Malaysia. The UMNO-MCA alliance would eventually become the prototype for the Alliance Party, and subsequently the BN coalition, which has ruled the country uninterrupted since 1955.

The first thing the UMNO-MCA alliance needed to do was create a united multi-racial front to satisfy the British's prerequisite for self-governance. They did this by merging with yet another ethnically-based party, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), in 1954. Together, the three component parties formed the Alliance Party to contest in the country's first local general elections in 1955. The 1955 election served as a "trial run" for the outgoing British colonials to determine which party would form the new independent Malaysian government, and if Malaysia was indeed ready for self-governance. The Alliance Party won 51 out of 52 seats and showed the British that the colony could govern the country on its own through multi-ethnic cooperation.

Although the Alliance Party's victory may have convinced the British that the country's diverse ethnic groups could work together, it is noteworthy to mention that the structure of the Alliance Party presents a rather peculiar marriage of convenience in Malaysian history. The UMNO-MCA-MIC model of inter-ethnic cooperation is

¹⁷⁸ Wan Hashim Wan Teh, *Race Relations in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983), 53.

communal based. The component parties that made up the Alliance did not differ in political and ideological persuasions, but they did differ along racial, cultural, and ethnic lines. Farish Noor observes that the political arrangement in Malaysia is akin to:

an American political landscape where there was not one democratic party but rather several, divided and differentiated along the lines of race and culture. One would be puzzled by such an equation, and would wonder why there needed to be a Democratic Party for white Anglo-Saxons, another for African Americans, yet another for Latinos, and, of course, yet another for Asian Americans.¹⁷⁹

Noor's assessment of this arrangement highlights how the political bargaining between UMNO, MCA, and MIC is reminiscent of the colonial structure of segregated communities, each with its own elected leaders and organizational structures. Political difference is not delineated by ideological differences, but by ethnic, language, and cultural particularities. Several scholars have explained the popularity of communal parties in winning the support of the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. According to R.K. Vasil, Malays were not interested in supporting or joining non-communal parties, especially left-wing parties, because they were perceived as "non-Malay parties."¹⁸⁰ As such, non-communal parties were not safeguarding Malay supremacy and their position as the country's original peoples. This is a testimony to the colonial logic of bounded

¹⁷⁹ Noor, *What Your Teacher Didn't Tell You*, 60.

¹⁸⁰ R.K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-Communal Political Parties in West Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971), 36. See also K.J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press for the University of Singapore, 1965); Karl von Vorys, *Democracy without Consensus: Communalism and Political Stability in Malaysia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Hua Wu Yin, *Class and Communalism in Malaysia: Politics in a Dependent Capitalist State* (London: Zed Books, 1983); and Cheah Boon Kheng, *The Challenge of Ethnicity*.

categories of race and ethnic identities where membership to a political party is not based on political persuasions but on ethnic association.¹⁸¹

It is also worth mentioning that these political parties were founded by elite, western-educated nationalists. To invoke Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, bourgeois nationalists are not revolutionary or anti-colonial since they are simply replicating the socio-political system that was already set up by the outgoing colonizers.¹⁸² Fanon's analysis reminds us that elite nationalists in Malaysia, such as the members of UMNO, MCA, and subsequently the Alliance Party, did not alter the pre-existing colonial structures that were put in place in Malaysia.¹⁸³

With Alliance victory secured, the component parties needed to negotiate an agreement that would satisfy the demands of the three ethnic groups. This negotiation, now famously called "the historic bargain" by historians of Malaysia, granted basic citizenship rights for non-Malay groups along with the right to preserve and practice their language, religions, and cultural traditions of their choice. In exchange, the Alliance

¹⁸¹ For example, I have mentioned earlier that Onn Jaafar, the founding member of UMNO was forced out of the party after he asked members to open up party membership to include non-Malays. In response, he formed the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP), which was non-communal. The IMP in the 1955 election, but lost out to the more popular communal-based Alliance Party.

¹⁸² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 62. In particular, his chapter on "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," 148-205, gives much food for thought in relation to the decolonization process in Malaysia.

¹⁸³ MCA's founder and president, Tan Cheng Lock, was a Straits-born businessman from Melaka. He was educated in a western school and spoke little Chinese. Like Tan, many MCA party members were conservative and moderate Chinese leaders represented mainly by business tycoons, and educationists. Interestingly, many early MCA members were also former Kuomintang (KMT) members who joined MCA as an alternative and in opposition to the Malayan Communist Party. The MCA would appeal to both British authorities and UMNO Malay nationalists as a "moderate" movement who were friendly to Malay interests and more than willing to work with UMNO towards achieving independence. See Lee Kam Hing, and Heng Pek Koon, "The Chinese in Malaysian Political System," in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, 194-227; Heng Pek Koon, *Chinese Politics in Malaysia: A History of the Malaysian Chinese Association* (Singapore: Oxford University, 1988); and Christopher Bayly, and T.N. Harper, *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

guaranteed the primacy of Malays as Malaysia's original people and all the special rights and privileges afforded thereof. These agreements were later enshrined in the Malayan Constitution. According to the Constitution, Malay is recognized as the country's official language and Islam as its official religion. It also safeguards the Malay Rulers' positions as the head of Malay culture, specifying that each of these rulers would be elected as *Yang Di Pertuan Agong's* (King) every five years to serve as the country's symbolic ruler. The Constitution also confers special rights and privileges on Malays, such as quotas in university placements, scholarships, public services, and economic access.¹⁸⁴ Most importantly, the Constitution effectively cements Malay dominance in Malaysian politics and culture.

Robert Hefner calls the Malaysian setup an example of an "ethnically differentiated citizenship," where there are clear institutional distinctions among citizens along categories such as ethnicity, race, gender, etc.¹⁸⁵ In an effort to secure independence from the British, the MCA insisted that a deal with UMNO was the best way forward even though the bargain ultimately puts other minority groups at a disadvantage.¹⁸⁶ Having secured a victory, Malaysia officially became an independent nation on August 31, 1957 under the governance of the Alliance Party. This party continues to govern the country still, now reformed under the name *Barisan Nasional*

¹⁸⁴ This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the Malaysian Constitution, which is enshrined under Article 153. Opposition political parties made numerous attempts to amend this, with no success. For more information, see "Constitution of Malaysia," <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/research/malaysia-constitution.pdf> (accessed July 28, 2011).

¹⁸⁵ Hefner, "Introduction," 29. Also see Bhiku Parekh, "British Citizenship and Cultural Difference," in *Citizenship*, edited by Geoff Andrews (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 183-204.

¹⁸⁶ Part of this has to do with Chinese fear of other extreme Malay and Chinese political movements that would threaten to take away the gains MCA obtained for the Chinese community. See Lee, and Heng, "The Chinese in Malaysian Political System," 203.

(BN). Malaysia's independence signaled the coming of Malays as the primary political player in the nation. But there were many unresolved issues between the different ethnic groups even though they were all "represented" in the political process. The most salient of these issues involve the uneven economic development between Chinese and Malay.

Postcolonial Malaysia: Constructing the "Other" in Chinese Identity

Wang observes that Malaysian nationalism consisted of a "nucleus of Malay nationalism enclosed by the idea of Malay-Chinese-Indian partnership."¹⁸⁷ While the Alliance Party's formula consisted of cooperation between the three major communal parties, UMNO, MCA, and MIC, UMNO is now the majority "shareholder" of the three, and the Chinese community now had to content with the fact that they are always politically marginalized and underrepresented.¹⁸⁸ MCA's alliance with UMNO caused Chinese discomfort against UMNO's pro-Malay policies while simultaneously, Malay resentment towards Chinese economic strength continued to plague Sino-Chinese relations. This came to a head-on collision in the aftermath of the General Elections of 1969.

In the lead-up to the election, the Chinese had lost confidence in the MCA and chose to cast their votes on Opposition political parties, namely the Chinese-led Democratic Action Party (DAP).¹⁸⁹ The DAP ran under the slogan of a "Malaysian

¹⁸⁷ Wang Gungwu, "Malay Nationalism," in *Royal Central Asian Journal* 49 (1962): 321.

¹⁸⁸ Lee, and Heng, "The Chinese in Malaysian Political System," 202.

¹⁸⁹ The DAP was originally the Malaysian branch of Singapore's People Action Party. When Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965, some PAP members decided to stay behind and formed the party. While the majority of DAP members were Chinese, membership is open to all races of Malaysian

Malaysia.” The party pursued a campaign promising equal access to political, economic, and cultural rights for all Malaysians regardless of race and ethnicity. Due to MCA’s declining influence, the DAP made huge gains in the election. As a result, the Alliance Party fared poorly in the 1969 General Elections. Although the Alliance Party was returned to power, it lost significant seats in Parliament. The Malay community interpreted Chinese rejection of the Alliance Party as a challenge to Malay primacy. Fearing that they may lose their special position in Malaysia, rioting broke out in Kuala Lumpur on May 13, 1969 where Malays targeted Chinese businesses and burned Chinese properties. Dozens of Chinese were injured and some were killed. Today, the BN government dissuades people from pursuing this topic since it may threaten national harmony.¹⁹⁰ This incident serves as an example of the damaging effects of a deep-seated mistrust between Malays and non-Malays.

In the aftermath of the 1969 riots, the Tunku stepped down as president of UMNO and Prime Minister of Malaysia. His successor, Abdul Razak, consolidated UMNO’s primacy in Malaysian politics through a series of constitutional amendments in 1971. Fearing another repeat of the 1969 riots, these amendments forbade any political debates, publications, acts, and speeches concerning issues of Malay special privileges or issues

society. However, it is unfortunately perceived as a “Chinese party” that champions Chinese rights by many Malays.

¹⁹⁰ Malaysians still do not know the real cause of the riots as this is a highly sensitive issue. It has been suggested that violence erupted after the post-election victory parade organized by the DAP went through some Malay-dominated areas in Kuala Lumpur. At the same time, it is said that some members of the parade began jeering at the Malay residents. The Malays resented this and the riots soon ensued. This is a highly “Malay-centric” and pro-government explanation which blames the Chinese for escalating the situation. Yet, many “versions” and theories exist in explaining the lead up to the riots. For examples of this, see Kua Kia Soong, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (Kuala Lumpur: SUARAM, 2007); Tunku Abdul Rahman, *May 13: Before and After* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu Press, 1969); and Leon Comber, *13 May 1969: A Historical Survey of Sino-Malay Relations* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1983).

that challenge Islam and Malay as the official religion and language. Most notable is the implementation of the National Economic Policy (NEP) which afforded Malays easier and more economic access. Citing Malay economic backwardness as the precursor for this policy, the NEP attempted to “correct” the economic imbalance between the Malays and non-Malays.¹⁹¹ In other words, it is a form of reverse affirmative action for the majority ethnic group. Applications for business licenses and contracts now became largely reserved for Malays. While its intention was to restructure the economic and social imbalances of the ethnic groups in Malaysia, in reality, the NEP’s programs privileged only elite UMNO members and not the Malay poor.¹⁹² Cheah argues that the “historic bargain,” once based on compromises and accommodations made between the three ethnically-based political parties, became “a binding and cast-iron ‘social contract’ which became sacrosanct to control or prevent communal differences.”¹⁹³ The economic, cultural, and political changes subsequent to the 1969 race riots brought about massive changes for the Chinese. While it appears that the NEP had curbed Chinese-Malay tensions, nevertheless the colonial structure which undergirds the current political system remains in effect.

¹⁹¹ To be sure, it addressed the economic imbalance between Chinese and Malay. Strangely, the Indians were excluded from the NEP policy as the Indian community was just as poor, if not poorer than the Malays.

¹⁹² In addition to privileging only a select few elite members, the NEP also yielded a high level of political and economic cronyism. See Edmund Gomez, and Jomo K. Sundaram, *Malaysia’s Political Economy: Politics, Patronage and Profits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 25. See also Yoshihara Kunio, *The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism in South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ian Brown, *Economic Change in South-East Asia, c. 1830-1980* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Nicholas White, “The Beginnings of Crony Capitalism: Business, Politics and Economic Development in Malaysia, c. 1955-70,” in *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no.2 (2004): 389-417.

¹⁹³ Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, 51.

Time and time again, the Malays and BN party would reproduce the colonial trope of the lazy Malay and the shifty Chinese to explain why Malays are economically behind the Chinese. Twelve years before becoming Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad wrote a controversial book explaining Malay backwardness and articulating the fear that the Malays would eventually become dispossessed against aggressive Chinese business practices. In *The Malay Dilemma*, Mohamad faults Malay “inbreeding” as the reason for Malay backwardness, compared to the dynamic Chinese community who “decreed that marriage should not be within the same clan.”¹⁹⁴ As such:

the Malays, whose own hereditary and environmental influence had been so debilitating, could do nothing but retreat before the onslaught of the Chinese immigrants. Whatever the Malays could do, the Chinese could do better and more cheaply.¹⁹⁵

Here is a striking example of the recapitulation of Social Darwinism in postcolonial Malaysia. Accordingly, an aggressive foreign race such as the Chinese, who had evolutionarily progressed with time, overwhelmed the stagnant Malays in the commercial realm. The essentializing of Malay and Chinese ethnic identities continues to reproduce long after the British have left Malaysia.

Mohamad also argues that the Malays need to assert themselves as true heirs of Malaysia, since it was the Malays that first brought order to the land: “The Malays maintain that Malaya has always been, and still is, their land. If citizenship must be conferred on other races who have settled down and made their homes in Malaya, it is the

¹⁹⁴ Mahathir bin Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma* (Singapore: D. Moore for Asia Pacific Press, 1970), 24.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

Malays who must decide the form of citizenship, the privileges, and obligations.”¹⁹⁶

Although dated and erroneous, *The Malay Dilemma* continues to carry much weight.

With the enshrinement of Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution which safeguards the special rights and privileges of the Malays, no one can publicly question or challenge this inherent inequality without risking retribution.¹⁹⁷ To critique Malay primacy is

tantamount to sedition under the Internal Security Act (ISA), an antiquated colonial law which allows law enforcement authorities to detain and imprison people without arrest warrants.¹⁹⁸ The Chinese, once sojourners seeking better lives in colonial Malaysia, now

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 121. For another example explaining the discursive entrenchment of values and tropes that have defined Malay subjectivity, see Yao Souchou, “After the Malay Dilemma: The Modern Malay Subject and Cultural Logic of “National Cosmopolitanism” in Malaysia,” in *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 18, no.2 (2003): 201-229.

¹⁹⁷ There have been several instances where the BN government invoked the ISA to detain politicians and activists for speaking out against Malay supremacy. In 1987, the BN government under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad detained 106 Chinese members from various Opposition parties for inciting ethnic tension and exploiting the government’s liberal and tolerant attitude. The infamous “Ops Lalang” (translated as *Operation Weed Out*) started when the Chinese community protested the Ministry of Education’s attempt to appoint non-Chinese educated school administrators to vernacular Chinese schools (Chinese-medium schools funded by the government with school assets belonging to local Chinese communities represented by boards of trustees). See John Hilley, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition* (London: Zed Books, 2001); Khoo Boo Teik, *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and its Discontents* (London: Zed Books, 2003); and Meredith Weiss, *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). Curiously, when a 2005 UMNO Youth Annual General Assembly featured a Malay politician blatantly waving a *keris* (a Malay ceremonial dagger) defending Malay supremacy and threatening to start a “war” if non-Malays were to criticize Malay special rights. It was not only the raising of the *keris* as a symbol of Malay pride and supremacy that upset many Malaysians but the threatening, provocative utterances of UMNO leaders delegates that aroused many non-Malays’ anger. If there are any doubts that the Malays have a firm grip on Malaysia, it is how the government allowed and accepted these highly inflammatory speeches and displays of violence without any reprimand from the Malays. Worst of all, non-Malays, including members of the BN coalition partners, were rebuked for their reaction to the *keris*-raising incident. The “perpetrator” of this incident, Hishamuddin Hussein, has since apologized for the incident, 3 years after the incident. See Beh Li Yi, “Religion and History: BN MP with All Guns Blazing,” *Malaysiakini*, March 15, 2006, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/48377> (accessed February 13, 2013).

¹⁹⁸ The law took its cue from the Emergency Regulations Ordinance of 1948, enacted by the British colonial government during the Malayan Communist Emergency. Although the Emergency officially ended in 1960, the newly independent Malaysian government chose to retain this draconian law and renamed it as the Internal Security Act (ISA). Under Article 149 of the Malaysian Constitution, the ISA’s main purpose is to allow preventive detention of suspected communists and deter communist activities in Malaysia. But communist activities in Malaysia have all but died out with the disbanding of the

have to contend that they will always be looked upon as foreigners – *pendatang* – despite the fact that they are loyal citizens of Malaysia. The essentializing image of the greedy and untrustworthy Chinese constructed by dominant Malays continues to hold sway in Malaysian society.

Today, the communal narrative remains alive and well in Malaysian politics despite the presence of multi-ethnic opposition parties.¹⁹⁹ The BN party continues to enact policies that promote a pro-Malay view of history. For example, in 2011 the Education Ministry proposed to establish a special committee consisting of “top historians” to update the curriculum and content in Malaysian history secondary school textbooks. The Ministry tasked the committee to make the necessary revisions in the curriculum in an effort to inculcate nation building, foster unity, and to “nurture patriotism and loyalty to the country among students and strengthen their identity as Malaysians.”²⁰⁰ While this may sound noble and honorable, I am suspicious of the Education Ministry’s so-called patriotic agenda as this appears to be a ploy to reinforce racial politics by essentializing Malaysia’s ethnic identities into the country’s political

Malayan Communist Party in 1989. Strangely, the law remains in place today, and has been extended to detaining any persons suspected of seditious activities. This law has been heavily criticized by local human rights groups, opposition political parties, and even the international community.

¹⁹⁹ See Joseph Chinyong Liow, and Afif Pasuni, “Debating the Conduct and Nature of Malaysian Politics: Communalism and New Media Post-March 2008,” in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 29, no.4 (2010): 39-65.

²⁰⁰ “DPM Meets Committee on History Textbook Curriculum,” *The Star*, May 3, 2011, <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2011/5/3/nation/20110503150107&sec=nation> (accessed June 15, 2011).

culture, a culture where Malay rights and special privileges continue to be upheld without any critique.²⁰¹

Cheah Boon Kheng observes that there is a concentrated effort to construct Malaysian history primarily as a history of the Malay people.²⁰² These histories contain “overt and overly Islamic and Malay-centric slant, factual errors, half-truths, value judgments and politically motivated content.”²⁰³ Accordingly, the historical narrative places the Malays, Islam, and UMNO at the center of the story. Malay Muslims serve as the primary players in the creation of the nation of Malaysia while non-Malays play only minor roles.²⁰⁴ Along with the indigenous peoples of Malaysia, the Malays claim to be the country’s original inhabitants, thus justifying their special rights and privileges.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ It is important to point out that the Education Ministry initiated this campaign when the ruling party was at their most vulnerable. In the 2008 General Elections, the BN coalition lost a significant number of seats in Parliament, and suffered its largest defeat since coming into power in 1957. They faced a resurgent Opposition coalition that had long criticized the BN for its pro-Malay and pro-Islam policies. No longer enjoying an overwhelming majority in Parliament, it is not surprising that the government would turn towards history as a political instrument to strengthen their legitimacy as an inclusive and fair political entity for all ethnic groups in Malaysia.

²⁰² For more information, see Cheah Boon Kheng, “Ethnicity, Politics and History Textbook Controversies in Malaysia,” in *American Asian Review* 21, no.4 (2003): 229-52.

²⁰³ “Reclaiming Our Truly Malaysian History,” *The Centre for Policy Initiatives* http://english.cpiasia.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2179:reclaiming-our-truly-malaysian-history&catid=141:lim-teck-ghees-contribution&Itemid=93 (accessed July 23, 2011).

²⁰⁴ To be sure, it is a version of history that privileges one particular point of view – that of the ruling BN party. See Paul Kratoska, “Many Malayas: Placing Malaysia in a Historical Context,” in *New Perspectives in History (Essays on Malaysian Historiography)*, edited by Cheah Boon Kheng (Kuala Lumpur: The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2007), 244.

²⁰⁵ While it is true Malays settled in the land now called Malaysia earlier than the Chinese, in reality, the indigenous people pre-date any Malay settlement in the country. In the eyes of the non-Malays, they perceive Malay recognition of indigenous people as *bumiputras* as a political ploy. The Malays argue that prior settlement is not important a determinant as “civilization.” To further justify their position, the BN government implemented a policy to assimilate certain indigenous groups into Malay Muslims. This is especially relevant among the *Orang Asli* (translated as “natural people”) people in Peninsula Malaysia. With these policies, the Malays have shown that the only way one can be considered to be *bumiputra* in Malaysia is to be ethnically Malay and religiously Muslim. For more information, see Robert Dentan, Kirk Endicott, Alberto Gomes, and Barry Hooker, eds., *Malaysia and the Original People: A Case Study of the Impact of Development and Indigenous Peoples* (Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 1997); Roy Davis

They invoke the romantic pre-colonial days of Melaka, where the Malays were in charge before other ethnic groups came intruding into their lands.²⁰⁶ While this is not untrue, it is an exaggeration to claim that Melaka was purely a Malay kingdom. As I mentioned earlier, there was a great deal of cultural and inter-ethnic mingling during this time period. This telling of history omits and marginalizes the narratives and voices of Malaysia's ethnic minorities.²⁰⁷ This is especially true for the Chinese who are reduced to playing nominal roles in the annals of Malaysian history.²⁰⁸

In light of growing discrimination against the Chinese, some chose to leave Malaysia in search for a better life. This "brain drain" is an alarming phenomenon of

Linville Jumper, *Power and Politics: The Story of Malaysia's Orang Asli* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997); Roy Davis Linville Jumper, *Orang Asli Now: The Orang Asli in the Malaysian Political World* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999); and Colin Nicholas, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia* (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2000).

²⁰⁶ The Melaka Sultanate is often invoked as a period where the values and norms "Malayness" came to be. As a result of this historical interpretation, non-Malay contribution to Malaysian history are downplayed and dismissed. For more information, see Nigel Worden, "'Where it All Began': The Representation of Malaysian Heritage in Malaysia," in *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7, no.3 (2001): 199-218.

²⁰⁷ Haryati Hussan and Hamidin Abd Hamid, "Writing Marginalized Groups into Malaysian Social History," in *New Perspectives*, 147.

²⁰⁸ One point of contention which drew the ire of the Chinese community and is worth mentioning is the depiction of Yap Ah Loy, the third "Kapitan China" of Kuala Lumpur in the late 1800s. Yap played a major role in the overall development of Kuala Lumpur from a sleepy mining town to a commercial center. Yet, his contribution was conveniently brushed aside in Malaysian history textbooks. Referring specifically on a Form Two history textbook, Ranjit Singh Malhi, author of numerous high school history textbooks in the 1980s and 1990s, stressed that the current historical narrative did not give Yap his due recognition. When he raised these concerns, the Education Ministry promptly accused him as "unpatriotic" and "anti-nationalist." For more information, see "History Textbooks Biased, Say Writers," *The Sun*, December 13, 2010, <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/local/history-textbooks-biased-say-writers> (accessed January 7, 2012). There are also numerous published panel discussions and response papers by Singh and other concerned historians addressing these accusations of not understanding Malaysia's history. See Ranjit Singh Malhi, "Response by Dr Ranjit Singh Malhi to 'Non-Malays Don't Understand Malaysia's History,'" *The Centre for Policy Initiatives*, http://english.cpiasia.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2163:response-by-dr-ranjit-singh-malhi-tonon-malays-dont-understand-malaysias-history&catid=216:others (accessed January 7, 2012).

human capital that is on the rise in Malaysia. According to the World Bank report, the brain drain is overwhelmingly represented by non-Malays, mostly younger Chinese Malaysians who have earned an overseas tertiary education.²⁰⁹ The report further states that “economic conditions” and “social injustice” are the main factors for the brain drain.²¹⁰ The report is a testament to the damaging effects of pro-Malay and race-based policies in the country – an ironic product of British colonialism – now recapitulated in the laws of postcolonial Malaysia.

Conclusion

The contemporary Malaysian political, cultural, and ethnic landscape remain entrenched along divisive and sectarian lines, re-creating racial categories inherited by British colonial policies. The specter of British colonialism looms large in the psyche of many Malaysians today. Even after 56 years of independence, much of the nation’s political, social, and economic structures are based on inherited colonial models. The history of Malaysia is often retold through Malay eyes with Malay-centric stories.

Eugene K.B. Tan argues that in the case of Malaysia where Malays dominate the political sphere while the Chinese control the economic sphere, this sort of arrangement that is based on racial and ethnic divisions would only reify and essentialize the respective ethnic identities; whenever an ethnic minority group becomes successful either in the political, social, or economic sphere, it would quickly become the subject of envy

²⁰⁹ Philip Schellekens, “Malaysia Economic Monitor: Brain Drain,” http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMALAYSIA/Resources/324392-1303882224029/malaysia_ec_monitor_apr2011_full.pdf (accessed August 1, 2011).

²¹⁰ Ibid.

and could possibly erupt in violence.²¹¹ We have already seen this in the May 1969 race riots.

For a long time, Chinese Malaysians were told that a vote for the Opposition was a vote for more extremist forms of government. They were also told that the BN coalition was a party that stands up for equality for all ethnicities in Malaysia. Today, the Chinese are no longer persuaded by this story. Although ethnic relations are more relaxed today, the trope of the greedy and ungrateful Chinese continues to resurface whenever there are any rumblings of protest and critiques against the ruling pro-Malay BN government. Racial and ethnic boundaries are strictly reinforced, and any semblance of criticism is quickly squashed under the justification of maintaining racial harmony. This has ensured the erasure of flexible characteristics of ethnic boundaries that was once part of Malaysian history in favor of fixed identities, enabling the enforcement and control of boundaries. Any deviation from these boundaries will most certainly incur the wrath of the ruling government. This is the Malaysian dilemma today: how can Malaysians learn to co-exist peacefully without even learning who their neighbors are ethnically and religiously and without resorting to essentialized views of ethnic identities?

In this chapter, I provided a brief historical overview of the Chinese in Malaysia. I also showed that the Chinese community is not a homogeneous group. Rather, they come from all walks of life and multitude geographic regions and ethnic groups with different conceptions of who they are. Although Malaysia's plural and multi-cultural society was largely the byproduct of British colonialism, it also reified strict ethnic boundaries that

²¹¹ Eugene K.B. Tan, "From Sojourners to Citizens: Managing the Ethnic Chinese Minority in Indonesia and Malaysia," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no.6 (2001): 959-960.

contributed to the marginalization of non-Malays in Malaysia today. It is important to show the historical narrative of Chinese migration to Malaysia because past events shape and unconsciously reproduce the *habitus* of not only the Malays, but of the Chinese as well.

Although the Chinese are a minority and marginalized group in Malaysia, I also want to point out that they continue to preserve despite their disadvantaged status. As we approach the second decade of the twenty-first century, an influential Chinese middle class began to emerge, especially in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur. Shunned by the local universities and admission policies that privilege Malays, Chinese families sought to provide quality education for their children without the aid of the government by sending them overseas. While some remained overseas post-graduation, those who returned home after their education sought out employment in the private sector, in multinational corporations, or became self employed, preferring not to have anything to do with government-run institutions. They also became more vocal in expressing their dissatisfaction for being treated as second-class citizens. The Chinese are constantly remaking themselves and negotiating their identities through new cultural and social lenses.

As this chapter has demonstrated, any “official” depiction of Chinese Malaysians is problematic, incomplete, and contested. With such a strict maintenance of ethnic boundaries, how does one construe and define a Chinese identity within the schema of Malaysian society? If Chinese identities are porous and multiple, what are the markers if any, of “Chineseness” in Malaysia? What resources do they have access to and utilize as they navigate such complex processes as fitting in, assimilation, survival, and resistance?

How are these identities presented, invoked, negotiated and deployed? In the next chapter, I will attempt to answer these questions by exploring the lives of the Metro Church members as they negotiate their ethnic Chinese identities. Their unique stories provide a lens to analyze Chinese interactions within the larger Malaysian landscape.

CHAPTER THREE: WHAT MAKES CHINESE “CHINESE?”

In my grandparents' home were two large portraits of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother. My great-grandmother came from a well-established and wealthy Chinese family who settled in Georgetown, a bustling city with a diverse population and culture in the island of Penang soon after emigrating from China. She was the niece of Dr. Wu Lien-Teh, the famous “plague doctor” of China.²¹² The Wu family (or Ng in Cantonese) were financially well off and highly educated.

My great grandmother was not like any typical Chinese woman. She enjoyed cooking “Nyonya” dishes, a blend of Chinese and Malay cuisine. She also preferred to wear attire that was not considered to be traditional Chinese – Malay sarongs with batik prints. She was fluent in Chinese, Malay, and English. Her multi-lingual skills must have aided her with access to a diverse clientele in her midwifery. Later, my father confirmed that my great-grandmother had “a little bit of Malay blood.” This apparently explains why she did not behave like a regular Chinese person.

²¹² Wu, a western-educated medical doctor hailing from Penang, Malaysia, became an expert on the pneumonic plague, a variant of the bubonic plague which killed millions during the European Middle Ages. He came to recognition as the person fought the plague in China. In addition, he promoted western medicine in China and during the twilight years of the Qing Dynasty and into Early Republican China, and published his seminal work *A Treatise on Pneumonic Plague* in 1926. This and many more stories are chronicled in his autobiography *Plague Fighter: The Autobiography of a Modern Chinese Physician* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1959); and Wu Yu-Lin, *Memories of Dr. Wu Lien-Teh: Plague Fighter* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1995).

I am recounting this small slice of my family's history to show how difficult it is to define who is a Chinese in Malaysia. While my ancestors migrated from China, spoke Chinese, celebrated Chinese New Year, and enjoyed doing "Chinese things" such as playing mahjong, they also spoke fluent English, wore non-traditional Chinese clothing, and participated in activities that were not considered "Chinese." As a fifth generation Chinese Malaysian, I may look the part, but I certainly do not play the part. For example, many Chinese consider language to be the benchmark in determining their Chinese ethnic identity; I do not know how to read or write in Chinese. By that standard, I am not truly Chinese; ethnic identity, however, goes beyond mastery of the language.

In the previous chapter, I provided an historical background of the Chinese in Malaysia. In particular, I showed how British colonial structures, undergirded by European theories of racial superiority, reified and essentialized Chinese identities. Through census collecting and the divide and rule policy, the British kept Malaysia's distinct ethnic groups apart from each other. These policies created the *habitus* that later became internalized by the ruling BN government. In inheriting this colonial legacy, each ethnic group came to be associated with certain characteristics in a homogenous way – lazy Malays, greedy Chinese, and drunk Indians. The Malaysian government continues to "Other" the Chinese and Indian communities, rhetorically casting them as ungrateful second class citizens. Yet, any "official" depiction of Chinese Malaysians is problematic, incomplete, and contested. Chinese identities in Malaysia are complex.

How does one define Chineseness?²¹³ What are the markers, if any, of a Malaysian Chinese identity? Are identities unchanging and self-bounded categories? Or are they something that can be situationally and strategically manipulated at a collective level? How, and to what purpose are these identities presented, invoked, negotiated and deployed? In this chapter, I analyze the data collected from my fieldwork and interviews with Metro Church members to explore the construction of Chinese ethnic identities in Malaysia. This chapter contends that Metro Church members construct what I call a “Modern Chinese” ethnic identity. This identity is an attempt to distance oneself from the imposed essentialist categories by the dominant Malays. As such, these identities are constructed and flexible. However, these identities also display attachments to static concepts – a primordial identity of Chineseness. Put simply, Chinese ethnic identities are constantly shifting and fraught with tensions. I argue also that a processual outlook is more useful means of analysis, and can lead to a way out of the structure-versus-agency dichotomy.²¹⁴

I shall intersperse my fieldwork and interviews with relevant scholarship on ethnicity. After discussing Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and fields, I then examine

²¹³ Although there is no clear definition regarding the term “Chineseness,” generally, “Chineseness” refers to the condition of being ethnic Chinese, that is, how one self-identifies as Chinese. For more information, see Wang Gungwu, *The Chineseness of China: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Tu Wei-ming, ed., *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Andrea Louie, *Chineseness Across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Richard Chu, “Imagining, Contesting, and Negotiating Chinese-ness: Four Books on the Chinese Diaspora,” in *China Review International* 13, no.1 (2006): 63-82; Edgar Wickberg, “Global Chinese Migrants and Performing Chineseness,” in *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 3, no.2 (2007): 177-193; and Zhu Aijun, *Feminism and Global Chineseness: The Cultural Production of Controversial Women Authors* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2007).

²¹⁴ Although this chapter concerns itself mostly with ethnic identities, I am aware that one cannot separate ethnicity with religion. The question of religion and identity will receive a more robust treatment in the next chapter.

Metro Church members' taken-for-granted ways of thinking about and acting upon the social world – namely China as their ancestral homeland (roots), Confucian values, Chinese language, and Chinese business savvy. However, *habitus* is not deterministic. Rather, it is an open system of dispositions where social agents create, maintain, and modify the structure to suit their needs. Social actors possess the agency to situationally construct their ethnic identities within the constraints of the *habitus*. Thus, I examine the constructed nature of Metro Church's ethnic identity by exploring the creation of cultural boundaries between the Chinese minority and Malay majority. I will next examine how church members create demarcations between what call a "Modern Chinese" identity in opposition to a "Chinese" Chinese identity. Finally, I explore some of the limitations of postcolonial studies' contribution to the study of identity and how Bourdieu's analytical framework begins to capture the complexity of identity formation on a more contextual and processual level. Bourdieu offers a more complex analysis of the Malaysian context with his concepts of *habitus*, and strategy (sometimes called practice), an analysis that adds to and compliments much of postcolonial scholarship on identity.

Habitus and Field

Let me begin by exploring two of Bourdieu's most important theoretical categories: *habitus* and field. *Habitus* is an individually operationalized set of expectations and understandings based on the collection of experiences social agents encounter that shape their sense of the "rules of the game." The social agents "merely need to let themselves follow their own social 'nature,' that is, what history has made of

them, to be as it were, ‘naturally’ adjusted to the historical world they are up against.”²¹⁵ Here, is a system of “schemes of perception, thought and action... whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its productions.”²¹⁶ The effect of this is a naturalization of the social order. Power inscribes its logic into the everyday lives and categories of these naturalized views; Bourdieu demonstrates how power is masked through the naturalization process. Further, these “rules of the game” act as coping mechanisms “against unforeseen and ever-changing situations.”²¹⁷ *Habitus* implies that the social actor’s behavior is tacit and practical while actions tend not to be consciously reflective.

Bourdieu also understood the social world as divided by a variety of distinctive arenas of practice called fields. As a relational term, a field is a network of social relations and positions where agents (individuals, groups or institutions) are located.²¹⁸ These locations are determined as a result of the interaction between the rules of the field, the individual’s *habitus*, and the person’s capital. Each field possesses their own unique set of rules, knowledge and forms of capital. Individuals and groups are engaged in the struggle to maximize their positions in the current existing social order. In order to fully understand the concept of field, it is important to pay attention to the “positions” in the

²¹⁵ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 90.

²¹⁶ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 54-55.

²¹⁷ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

²¹⁸ Bourdieu elaborates this in his study of university culture and the academic field in *Homo Academicus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984). He explores the contours of the academic field to reveal that the university is the site of struggle which mirrors the contention between economic capital and cultural capital that exists within the ruling class.

field and its relations to one another.²¹⁹ Bourdieu believes that an individual occupies certain positions in society's various fields. These positions are contingent on how much capital or power that the individual possesses. Individuals are defined by their relational position within the field's distribution of capital. They would either form alliances with different members/groups that would improve their lot in society or exclude other groups that might threaten them. Similar to soccer or football games, fields are spaces where individuals and groups occupy; they are constantly jockeying for positions and "playing" to win. In this scheme, fields are:

networks of relations between individuals and institutions competitively engaged in the dynamics of cultural production, pursuit, consumption, and/or accumulation... invariably in one's *interest*... Thus each of us – by second nature because we have internalized this entire system – develop *strategies* to either maintain or improve our positions in this relational network of power that is the social world.²²⁰

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is useful in showing the historically "givens" – the inherited cultural patterns – of Chinese Malaysians that continue to manifest themselves in the current Malaysian context. These inherited cultural patterns continue exert powerful influence in the daily lives of Metro Church members. In the next section, I shall explore some "unchanging" and static markers of Chineseness that are products of a historically learned pattern of behavior which are internalized as an innate part of Metro Church members' ethnic identities.

²¹⁹ Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2007), 44.

²²⁰ Ibid., 45.

Inherited Cultural Givens

The China Mystique and Confucian Values

While having lunch at a restaurant with some church members after a Sunday service, one of them asked me if I have ever been to China. I replied in the negative. “Oh, that’s a shame,” he responded. “There’s a lot for you to see. You should go sometime. Get reconnected with your roots.” I was puzzled by this talk of roots and heritage. Like most Metro Church members, I too was born and raised in Malaysia. So, even if we are ethnically Chinese, would it not make more sense that our roots came from Malaysia and not China? Why do they continue to look at China as the place of their “roots?”

Even after many generations of living in Malaysia, many Chinese still genuinely feel that they are somehow connected to China. In the previous chapter, I showed how Chinese Malaysians became reified by the dominant Malays. More importantly, the post-British environment also created a plural society where inter-ethnic mingling continues to be a rarity in Malaysia. These socialized settings create *habitus* that predispose the Chinese to behave in certain unconscious ways. They are constrained by their historically trained cultural patterns. Metro Church members believe that there exist unique “primordial” cultural patterns that make them Chinese, and consequently set them apart from other ethnic groups in Malaysia. In particular, my interviews and observations attest to the cultural attachments towards China, the Chinese language, and Confucian cultural values. It appears thus, that there are certain discernible features and characteristics that are unquestionably Chinese. These features are, using Bourdieu’s words, both structural and structuring.

Metro Church members consider ancestral and geographic origins as important markers of Chinese identity. Yet, how is this any different from, say, German Americans? Anthony Reid argues that the issue of Chineseness differs from other globalized identities because of China's overwhelming presence in influencing "past and future imaginings" of Chinese identities.²²¹ Throughout the history of Chinese migration to Malaysia, the Chinese saw themselves as an extension of their kin in the mainland. With the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the subsequent turmoil in Republican China, the diasporic Chinese sought to create an imagined "New China" which upheld traditional Chinese values and traditions.²²² This thought persisted until decolonization demanded new local loyalties to the newly independent nation.²²³ Although they are now citizens of Malaysia, this is not to say that they stopped being Chinese. Wang argues that even though they are less bounded to China, they continue to emphasize personal connections with their ancestral past.²²⁴ Images of Chinese history become landmarks in paradigms that are central to their self-recognition as Chinese. Thus, this should not be seen as a total rejection of Chineseness as Chinese Malaysians continue to display attachments to China.²²⁵ This is also related to the way the colonial powers and later the Malaysian government has historically treated the Chinese. Most notably, the reification and bounded notions of Chinese ethnic identities, the emphasis on Chinese business success

²²¹ Anthony Reid, "Introduction: Chineseness Unbound," in *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no.3 (2009): 197.

²²² Tu, "Cultural China: Periphery as Center," in *Living Tree*, 27.

²²³ Wang Gungwu, "Chinese History Paradigms," in *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no.3 (2009): 205.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

²²⁵ See Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

and the sense of ethnic communalism is still present in Malaysia. Applied to the Chinese in Malaysia, the notion of ancestral heritage has generally reproduced these historical patterns.

China's draw presents one the strongest manifestation of primordial identity. The idea of the existence of a primordial ethnic identity presupposes that ethnicity is *sui generis*. Rooted in German Idealism, proponents of the primordial approach believe that identities are fixed with clearly drawn boundaries, and that there are intrinsic features at the core of one's identity.²²⁶ Moreover, proponents of this understanding of identity point to the importance of bloodlines, common ancestry, language, and customs as the criteria in determining one's ethnic identity. One of the early scholars of such an approach was Edward Shils, who coined the term "primordialism." Shils argues that the strength and persistence of kinship ties is not just about "the function of interaction...it is because a certain ineffable significance is attributed to the tie of blood."²²⁷ The strength of group solidarity relies not so much on interactions between members of the group, but on

²²⁶ Before there was such a thing as ethnic studies, there were philosophers who saw nations as discrete bounded groups. Among them was the German nationalist philosopher, Johann Herder. Herder developed a form of ethnic nationalism in which the state derives its political legitimacy from historic cultural or hereditary groups. He believed that national groups functioned as an "organic unit," and a "national organism" with its own unique and natural qualities such as language. Given that national groups were a natural organism, Herder perceived nations as an ineffable unit of humankind. The early relationship between German Idealism and early anthropological theories was crucial to the development of the idea of *Kultur*. These ideas became central to later developments in anthropology and ethnic studies as concepts such as "ethnicity," "race," and "culture" are perceived as essentialized units that every national group would possess. See Robert Reinhold Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931). See also Royal J. Schmit, "Cultural Nationalism in Herder," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no.3 (1956): 407-417; and Jack Eller, "Anthropology and Ethnicity; From Herder to Hermeneutics," in *Ethnic Studies Review* 21 (1998): 1-26.

²²⁷ Edward Shils, "Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties: Some Particular Observations on the Relationships of Sociological Research and Theory," *British Journal of Sociology* 8, no.2 (1957): 142.

common ancestry and the equation of ethnicity and family. People are capable of inducing selfless behavior on behalf of the group.²²⁸

Later, Clifford Geertz applied Shils' arguments to encompass social groups on a larger scale. In his article, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States," Geertz argues that primordial attachments form the basis of identity and becomes the building blocks of the nation-state. For Geertz, primordial attachments:

stem from the 'givens' or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed 'givens' of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves.²²⁹

What Geertz suggests is that primordial attachments are inherent in human beings. In this case, these "givens," the markers of ethnic identities such as blood, language, custom, and religion are natural and cannot easily be renounced or disassociated. Groups either connect or divide based on these markers. Further, Geertz cautions that these attachments are non-rational foundations of the human personality, and could potentially lead to conflicts with other group loyalties.

Geertz and Shils agree that there is a basic human need to band together based on natural attributes such as blood ties and common ancestry, customs and culture. As descendents of Chinese immigrants, China's rich traditions and culture elicits a strong emotional response among Metro Church. But this is a China that is heavily

²²⁸ Ibid., 133, 138.

²²⁹ Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 259.

romanticized. It is not the *nation-state* of China, but the China of days past. It is the China that is identified culturally instead of politically. Metro Church members nostalgically see China as a place of origin and a place where their traditional values and ethics originated. This is especially true concerning Confucian values of respect, honor, and filial piety.²³⁰

Through the ascription of Chinese values, we see the connection and romanticization of China. We can observe the outward and physical displays of Chineseness by the way Metro Church members decorate their homes. Whenever I visited their homes, I saw wall scrolls with Chinese calligraphy, Chinese tea sets, ornate red lanterns, and sometimes paintings depicting popular stories of Chinese history. I was even treated to a traditional Chinese tea serving ceremony on one visit; I was told that they had taken lessons to make sure that it was authentic.²³¹

In almost all instances, I was also informed that filial piety, the act of honoring one's elders and parents, is an important marker of being Chinese. Church members view this as part of a Confucian ethic that continues to play a vital role in the psyche of their

²³⁰ Even though many of my informants would not admit that they are "following" the teachings of Confucianism, nonetheless they would argue that Confucianism is in itself "not a religion," but more of a guide or philosophical treatise on establishing "right" and harmonious relationship based on respect, honor, and filial piety. Since they equated these traits as part of the Confucian ethos, they would make the argument that such traits are unique towards Chinese culture, and as such, becomes a marker of one's Chineseness.

²³¹ The image of the dragon, a creature that is associated with power, luck, and prosperity in Chinese mythology, is nowhere to be found. In addition, there were no family altars, charms such as the *pat kua*, or any shrines and images dedicated to the Chinese pantheon of gods in their homes. For example, the *pat kua*, meaning "eight symbols, is an octagon-shaped plate with a mirror that is placed over front doors of homes. It is meant to symbolize the fundamental concepts of reality, seen as eight inter-related concepts within Taoist cosmology. Metro Church members reject this as non-Christian trinkets, and should not be brought and adorned in their homes. For the members of Metro Church, the source for one's "luck" and prosperity comes only from Jesus Christ, not trinkets. Instead of dragons and *pat kuas*, there were pictures depicting familiar Christian stories such as the Last Supper, stylized cross-stitched Bible verses in English, as well as crosses hanging on the walls.

daily lives.²³² Moreover, they believe that this ethic is a good quality that every Chinese person in Malaysia should cultivate and foster. Two women from different social locations – Janet Lim and Nadine Ma – attest to the importance of cultivating Confucian values.

Janet, a widow and recent retiree, grew up in Kuala Lumpur in what she called “a very Chinese” background. Her father was a martial arts instructor: “Kung Fu,” she proudly declared. She is happy that her early childhood included reading Chinese classical texts, and she believes that filial piety is a very important value that every Chinese family should instill in their children. Her affinity toward her Chinese heritage affirms her values and identification as a Chinese.

Meanwhile, Nadine enthusiastically shared how China’s rich culture and history helped her recognize the values of respect and honor. Having grown up in a small town four hours east of Kuala Lumpur, she is thankful for her early exposure to Chinese culture and history: “If you read the entire Chinese history... you will feel very proud

²³² Confucian principles appear to be a common theme among scholars who equate this as a basis for Chineseness. Even though Confucius is attributed to codifying these rules and principles in the *Annals*, it is in fact rooted in earlier lifestyles of early Chinese communities before and during the time of Confucius. Thus, Confucianism constitutes a continuity of Chinese civilization from, and by extension, a continuity of primordial Chinese identity. Still, the term “Confucianism” itself has multiple meanings. For some, it is a way of life and religion. Others believe this to be a political ideology and social ethic. Others stress that Confucianism is simply a philosophical school of thought. I am also aware that the term has been criticized for forcing a single label on a wide range of historically and philosophically diverse texts and intellectual movements. For explorations on the multiple meaning behind this concept, see Roger Ames, “Religiousness in Classical Confucianism: A Comparative Analysis,” in *Asian Culture Quarterly* 12, no.2 (1984): 7-23; Tu Wei-ming, “The Confucian Tradition in Chinese History,” in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, edited by Paul S. Ropp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Rodney Taylor, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Kim-chong Chong, *Early Confucian Ethics: Concepts and Arguments* (Chicago: Open Court, 2007); Yijie Tang, “The Contemporary Significance of Confucianism,” in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 3, no.4 (2008): 477-501. For a general overview on Confucius’ life and the historical development of Confucianism in China, see Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985); and Annping Chin, *Confucius: A Life of Thought and Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

being a Chinese because of the rich culture and how long we have a rich civilization.” As a mother and successful corporate person, she tries to instill these filial values in her son.

These two women agree on the importance of the Confucian principle of filial piety as a marker of Chineseness even though they come from different backgrounds. Geertz’s explanation on the importance of natural attributes such as blood ties and common ancestry plays an important role in solidifying ethnic belonging among the women. These unconscious attributes continue to operate within the women’s lives. When the Chinese have been historically reminded that they are an immigrant group, the draw of China and Chinese cultural attributes continue to persist. These narratives show the pervasiveness of the *habitus* that continues to exert a large influence in these women’s lives.

Chinese Language

The ability to speak Chinese is also a major component in being Chinese.²³³ The young adult members of the church such as Nadine and Emily are highly motivated to ensure that their children receive Chinese language lessons. Along with her husband, Nadine believes in instilling in her son as much knowledge of Chinese language and history as possible. She sends her son to a Chinese-medium school, where he is taught to read, speak, and write in Chinese. As she spoke to me, Nadine recalled and lamented that her own schooling was under the national school system, where Malay was the medium of instruction. As part of a new generation of Chinese in postcolonial Malaysia, she had hoped that mastery in Malay language would gain her more social and economic

²³³ Here, I am referring to Mandarin, which is the “official” language of Chinese.

mobility.²³⁴ However, decades of the government's preferential treatment of Malays gradually disillusioned many Chinese Malaysians, including Nadine. She now realizes that no amount of mastery of Malay or Malaysian history and culture would ever grant her equal access to Malaysia's social and economic capital. It is because of this realization that she now sends her son to a Chinese-medium school. She believes that Chinese school is superior to national schools where Malay is the language of instruction. She also believes that a Chinese education would provide her son with the best opportunity to succeed in an increasingly hostile environment. Emily echoed Nadine's sentiments. Like Nadine, Emily also wants to make sure that her two daughters would be able to speak Chinese. She feels that her children will be more in touch with their roots if they learn Chinese. She agrees wholeheartedly that the ability to speak Chinese is an important feature in determining one's Chineseness.²³⁵

Both women believe that it is more beneficial to be with what they call "like-minded" people because they offer safety and familiarity. In these two stories, there is a prevalent theme of fear: fear of losing one's sense of pride and culture, of losing one's

²³⁴ See J.K.P. Watson, "Education and Cultural Pluralism in South East Asia, with Special Reference to Peninsular Malaysia," in *Comparative Education* 16, no.2 (1980): 139-158; Hena Mukherjee and Jasbir Singh Sarjit, "Education and Social Policy: The Malaysian Case," in *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Education* 15, no.2 (1985): 289-300; Mah Hui Lim, "Affirmative Action, Ethnicity and Integration: The Case of Malaysia," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 8, no.2 (1985): 250-276; Cheah, "Ethnicity, Politics and History Textbook Controversies in Malaysia;" and Cheah Boon Kheng, "The Bumiputera Policy and Nation Building: Dynamics and Dilemmas," in *Journal of Malaysian Studies (Special Issue)* 41, no.1 (2003): 339-408; and Cynthia Joseph, "'It is so Unfair here... it is so biased': Negotiating the Politics of Ethnic Identification in ways of being Malaysian Schoolgirls," in *Asian Ethnicity* 7, no.1 (2006): 53-73.

²³⁵ While many Chinese grew up speaking some dialect of Chinese, they were not taught how to read or write in Mandarin unless they went to a Chinese-medium school, or they were taught how to read and/or write by their parents. This is especially true among the younger generation living in the cities, are able to speak in Cantonese, or other in some dialect in Chinese such as Hokkien, Hakka, and Teochew – but never Mandarin.

roots, and more importantly, of losing political and socio-economic clout in a rapidly changing environment.

Yet, learning Chinese is complicated and perhaps counterintuitive, since this implies a sacrifice of cultural capital and economic potential. I do not think this is the case, however. Most church members are multilingual; they are already fluent in English. Although Malay is Malaysia's national language, the use of Malay is largely limited to interactions with Malays (and some Indians) and is rarely used in communication with other Chinese. Since the Malaysian government implements policies that disadvantage non-Malays in areas such as entrance to local universities and employment in government jobs (both of which use Malay as their medium), mastery in Malay language carries few advantages. For the Chinese, the *habitus*, socialized in the historical experience of discrimination and communalism in Malaysia, creates a naturalized view of their place in the world as well as develops proper strategies to retain and preserve the *habitus*. This helps explain the ambiguity of trying to learn Chinese while simultaneously adopting a western outlook.

Chinese Business Savvy

Perhaps one aspect of Chineseness most discussed by Metro Church members is the Chinese enterprising spirit. They are convinced that the innate Chinese sense of business savvy is what sets them apart from other ethnic groups, especially the Malays. Church members agree that the Chinese have an innate "enterprising spirit," and that the ability to work hard has enabled them to survive and succeed in business. Jimmy Ning claimed that Chinese Malaysians are "very resourceful and entrepreneurial." He argued

that Chinese businesses continue to flourish despite Malaysia's pro-Malay NEP policy. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, this aggressive economic policy was implemented by the pro-Malay BN government to "correct" the economic imbalance between the Malays and non-Malays. The policy in effect curtailed Chinese economic access in favor of Malay businesses. Mrs. Loring Gan echoed Jimmy's views and believes that the Chinese are also hardworking and enterprising people. She sums up the Chinese enterprising spirit as, "[whatever] I want to achieve, I achieve it through my own self, and I don't depend on any other people."

The idea that ethnic minorities share a strong collective primordial identity that translates to business practices has attracted much scholarly attention. Gordon Redding, in his *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, traces the economic culture of what he calls "the Overseas Chinese," suggesting that while the Overseas Chinese may not be living in China anymore, their hearts and minds have not left the country. Therefore, Chinese economic culture is bolstered by a unique ability to co-operate with one another. Redding argues that Chinese capitalism differs from Western capitalism in that it is based on the Chinese familial structure where trust, kinship, and paternalism take precedence over legalism and individual rights.²³⁶ Thus, the spirit of Chinese capitalism is a "set of beliefs and values which lies behind the behavior of Chinese businessmen."²³⁷ This spirit stems from the Confucian importance of family, its reciprocal relationship and hierarchy of order. In this analysis, Confucian thought stresses that good relationships are based on

²³⁶ Gordon Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 4.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

co-operative behavior among members of the community. Thus, attaining harmony and balance through good inter-personal relationships is of the utmost importance.²³⁸

Redding's work provides an analysis of Chinese capitalism from a culturalist perspective.²³⁹ Like those who take a culturalist view of Chinese capitalism, my informants also believe that they possess an innate essence exclusive to Chinese culture in business and commerce. This too stems from a historically reified view of Chinese Malaysians as shrewd business people. Since the history of Chinese migration to Malaysia is associated with hardworking laborers, Metro Church members would believe these historical practices to be an innate attribute of Chinese ethnic identities. Again, this may seem counter-intuitive since Chinese Malaysians are stereotyped as greedy and money-minded people. As I will explain later in the chapter, *habitus*, while durable, is not static, and this strategy-generating principle drives the thoughts, perceptions, and actions of Metro Church members to maneuver around the social field to improve their situation according to "the feel for the game."

Why do people band together around these natural givens? Harold Isaacs' idea of basic group identity provides an explanation for the persistence of primordial

²³⁸ Ambrose Yeo-chi King, "Kuan-hsi and Network Building: A Sociological Interpretation," in *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991): 63-84.

²³⁹ For more information on the culturalist perspective on Chinese business success, see John Kao, "The Worldwide Web of Chinese Business," in *Harvard Business Review*, March 1993, 24-36; Richard Whitley, *Business Systems in East Asia: Firms, Markets and Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1992); Joel Kotkin, *Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy* (New York: Random House, 1993); Constance Lever-Tracy, David Ip and Noel Tracy, *The Chinese Diaspora and Mainland China: An Emerging Economic Synergy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Murray Weidenbaum and Samuel Hughes, *The Bamboo Network: How Expatriate Chinese Entrepreneurs Are Creating a New Economic Superpower in Asia* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); and Henry Yeung and Kris Olds, *Globalization of Chinese Business Firms* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000). The culturalist explanation for Chinese business success has also come under stringent criticism. In particular, these critiques point toward the essentializing and fetishizing of Confucian principles. See *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, edited by Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (New York: Routledge, 1997).

attachments. Incorporating a socio-psychological lens in his analysis, Isaacs attributes a group's need to belong as "basic group identity." This basic group identity consists of "ready-made set of endowments and identifications which every individual shares with others from the moment of birth by the chance of the family into which he is born at that given time in that given place."²⁴⁰ In *Idols of the Tribe*, Isaacs argues that the fear of "aloneness" causes "a great clustering into separatenesses that will... improve, assure, or extend each group's power or place, or keep it safe or safer from the power, threat, or hostility of others."²⁴¹ If Geertz observes that primordial attachments and the need for sameness were prevalent in emergent post-colonial states, Isaacs believes that the increasing fragmentation of "old power systems" and the fragile instability of newly formed nations into clusters of separate groups have caused much anxiety and confusion among individuals.²⁴² As a result, people are desperate to regain some semblance of stability by "retribalizing" themselves. In other words, they cling on to their own ethnic group because it gives them a measure of physical and emotional security.²⁴³ Primordial bonds become solidified through the early process of socialization. These bonds possess overwhelming resilience because of a universal need for belonging and self-esteem.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ Harold Isaacs, *Idols of the Tribe: Group Identity and Political Change* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 31.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁴³ The appeal to psychological needs constitutes a further elaboration of the primordialist approach. For similar explanations, see John Stack, "Ethnic Mobilization in World Politics: The Primordial Perspective," in *The Primordial Challenge: Ethnicity in the Contemporary World*, edited by John Stack (London: Greenwood Press, 1986), 1-11. I have also alluded to the psychological/emotional attachment in Connor's article. See Walker Connor, "A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group is a," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1, no.4 (1978): 377-400.

²⁴⁴ Isaacs, *Idols*, 29-30.

Because of the need to connect and belong, Isaacs explains how primordial affinities and attachments continue to persist. Thus, identity is “an aspect of the emotional and psychological constitution of individuals; it is, correspondingly, bound up with the maintenance of personal integrity and security, and may be extremely resistant to social change.”²⁴⁵ In the face of marginalization and the nature of bounded communities in Malaysia, Malaysian Chinese hold tight to their primordial characteristics which include Confucian values, the Chinese language, and business savvy.

While Isaacs analyzes the powerful persistence of primordial affinities through a socio-psychological lens, Pierre van den Berghe believes that the roots of primordial attachments go far deeper than psychology by incorporating a socio-biological framework in the study of ethnicity. He points out that humans are genetically “programmed” to attach to a particular kin group and form alliances with like-minded people regardless of safety and security. Van den Berghe argues that all social organisms are programmed to be “nepotistic,” that is, behaving in an “altruistic manner in proportion to their real or perceived degree of common ancestry.”²⁴⁶ The propensity to establish kinship has a biological component not because:

we have a gene for ethnocentrism, or for recognizing kin; rather... that those societies that institutionalized forms of nepotism and ethnocentrism had a strong selective advantage over those that did not (assuming that any such ever existed), because kin selection has been the basic blueprint for animal sociality.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ For more information, see Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, especially in Chapter 4, “Ethnicity etcetera,” 40-51.

²⁴⁶ Pierre van den Berghe, “Race and Ethnicity: A Sociobiological Perspective,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1, no. 4 (1998): 405.

²⁴⁷ Pierre van den Berghe, “Bringing Beasts Back In: Towards a Bio-Social Theory of Aggression,” in *American Sociological Review* 39 (1974): 782.

People are driven by their “genetic mechanism for animal sociality... to maximize inclusive fitness.”²⁴⁸ Within the socio-biological framework, it is kinship sentiment, not culture that forms the basis of ethnic identity. Van den Berghe contends that culture is merely an approximate explanation for the persistence of primordial ties.²⁴⁹ Most of all, it is the genes in our bodies that determine individual relationships, group dynamics, and group associations.²⁵⁰

These two theories help explain how Metro Church functions as a safe haven for Chinese Malaysians to express their faith and socialize with like-minded people. Not only do they think alike, they also belong to the same ethnic group. Most of the church members come from a relatively similar socio-economic background. When I asked them if they have many friends outside the church, there was an air of anxiety among my participants. They explained that even though they did have friends outside the confines of the church, they were insistent that most of their close friends came from church. For example Maria Han cited the New Testament passage from Paul’s epistle in 2

²⁴⁸ Van den Berghe, “Race and Ethnicity,” 402.

²⁴⁹ Van den Berghe’s idea of ethnic nepotism is not without its supporters and detractors. In particular, his theory has drawn the support and interests from scholars who want to incorporate evolutionary biology into their analysis of kinship and ethnic groupings. For example, political scientist Tatu Vanhanen utilizes van den Berghe’s claims to test out the ethnic attitudes from several contemporary nation-states. Ultimately, Vanhanen concurs with van den Berghe’s theory and argues for the universality of ethnic nepotism. See Tatu Vanhanen, ed., *Ethnic Conflicts Explained by Ethnic Nepotism* (Stamford: Jai Press, 1999). See also R. Paul Shaw, and Yuwa Wong, *Genetic Seeds of Warfare: Evolution, Nationalism and Patriotism* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); J. Phillip Rushton, *Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life History Perspective* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995); and Frank Salter, “A Defense and Extension of Pierre van den Berghe’s Theory of Ethnic Nepotism,” in *Evolutionary Theory and Ethnic Conflict*, edited by Peter James, and David Goetze (Westport: Praeger, 2001), 39-70.

²⁵⁰ Although van den Berghe’s theory may be controversial as it advocates for a type of genetic favoritism, it also tries to explain why racism and xenophobia continues to manifest in human society, arguing that this as “a case of culture ‘hijacking’ genes which were selected for different ends. See van den Berghe, “Does Race Matter,” 62.

Corinthians – “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers” – as the reason not to associate too closely with “non-believers.” Maria reasoned:

So, let’s just say that if I’m a Christian and if you’re in a relationship with a non-Christian, it will affect your faith because you are being torn in between like going to church, and you know, your husband is like, “I don’t want you to go to church.” There is a reason why the Bible said that.

Although Maria is referring to a hypothetical marital relationship, there is no reason to doubt that she would have the same justification in reference to making friends. This is especially prevalent with reference to romantic relationships. Many of the church’s younger members are either in a serious romantic relationship or have married each other. As a minority and oppressed group, it made logical sense that Metro Church members would want to associate with their own kind since this constitutes a sound method to ensure their survival.

Still, these arguments do not explain why some church members have willingly left the safe confines of church. Mrs. Loring Gan has been attending Metro Church since the early 1990s with her husband. As an early pioneer of the church, she has witnessed a fair share of happenings in the church. She lamented that she has not seen a lot growth within the church:

KIT : [Do] you think [the church] will thrive? Grow some more, or stagnant?

LORING : Errr... it won’t grow.

KIT : It won’t?

LORING : It will grow by children... the babies members are producing.

KIT : Yeah? What do you think about the idea of the church growing within since they're not bringing in new people in. What do you think about that?

LORING : It's going to be a... clique. A family church. It's very dangerous.

KIT : Do you like that?

LORING : It's not for me to say whether I like it or not. So I just leave it.

But it's a family church, which is not very healthy.

Loring is concerned that the church may have become too isolationist and faults many of the church members for being too comfortable. She is convinced that this would ultimately create an insulated and "incestuous" environment.

Why do people continue to band together based on such things as blood, ancestral heritage, and communal familiarity? Walker Connor recognizes how emotions can be a powerful force in eliciting bonds of Chineseness. He argues that it is the intense passions invoked by ethnic bonds that form the building blocks of nationalism.²⁵¹ In his work, Connor concentrates on discovering the mechanisms that trigger these emotions. He suggests that speeches, songs, poems, and symbols act as examples of mechanisms triggering these tendencies. Ultimately, he concludes that successful responses regarding

²⁵¹ A political scientist by training, Connor describes the "nation" as a kinship group, that is, a group of people who feel that they are related ancestrally. For this reason, he uses a more precise term for nationalism - ethno-nationalism. The idea of shared blood relations and commonalities between members of the nation play to the emotional strength of the group and attests to the force of these primordial attachments that continues to affect human society.

ethnic attachments are invoked “*not* through appeals to reason but *through* appeals to emotions.”²⁵²

However, Connor’s theory fails to account for human agency. His argument assumes that people are easily manipulated by mechanisms and structures that influence them act in certain ways. At the same time, there is also a danger of assuming that people are fully cognizant of the choices they are making. Rather, I am pointing out that some things cannot be explained on the basis of rationality/irrationality. What may seem irrational in our eyes and by the majority of society can be considered rational through an internal process that may not be visible to us.²⁵³ That is why Bourdieu can give us much more analytical mileage in examining Metro Church members’ ethnic identities. What I am suggesting is a move away from a dichotomous structure/agency category and towards strategy. As Anthony Giddens argues:

structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both enabling and constraining. This, of course, does not prevent the structured properties of social systems from stretching away, in time and space, beyond the control of individual actors.²⁵⁴

In the next section, I show how church members strategically maneuver around the *habitus* to maximize material and symbolic profit. As such, they create demarcations and

²⁵² Walker Connor, *Ethno-Nationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 204.

²⁵³ See for example, Anthony Heath, *Rational Choice and Rational Exchange: A Critique of Exchange Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Amartya Sen, “Rational Fools,” in *Philosophy and Economic Theory*, edited by Martin Hollis and Frank Hahn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Donald Green, and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Steve Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Peter van der Veer, “Market and Money: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory,” in *Social Compass* 59, no.2 (2012): 183-192.

²⁵⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 25.

identities that begin to move away from the negative stigmatization of the Chinese. This is a highly complex process that involves negotiating western modernity with their inherited Chineseness.

Defining Chinese Ethnicity in Malaysia: Creating Ethnic Demarcations

Malays and Non-Malays

Wang Gungwu observes that in general, Chineseness is not a fixed category;²⁵⁵ there is little similarity between the Chinese who migrated across the Southeast Asian region.²⁵⁶ Place and locality are important determining factors in the overall construction of Chineseness as Wang sees identity as a flexible category in which the social actor possesses agential power to determine what is useful for them. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that Malaysia's generally accepted terms of identity – Malay, Chinese, Indian – are entrenched and reified along essentialist constructs. Yet, being Chinese in Malaysia goes beyond imposed labels since past and present social and political events as well as the daily living experience plays as much a factor in determining their identities. As a minority and marginalized community, they have to constantly negotiate with the

²⁵⁵ Wang Gungwu, "Chineseness: The Dilemmas of Place and Practice," in *Cosmopolitan Capitalists: Hong Kong and the Chinese Diaspora at the End of the 20th Century*, edited by Gary G. Hamilton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 101. See also David Yen-ho Wu, "Chinese and Non-Chinese Identities," in *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, edited by Tu Wei-ming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 148-167.

²⁵⁶ Wang is concerned about how Chineseness, when applied towards the Chinese who are living outside China, is utilized to mean an essentialized and unified group. What this means then is that there is a hardening of boundaries between Chinese and non-Chinese, where in reality, the majority of Chinese outside China lived in a flexible and heterogeneous sense of Chineseness. For more information, see Laurent Malvezin's interview with Wang at Asian Affairs in "Asian Affairs Interview with Wang Gungwu: Diaspora, a Much Abused Word, <http://www.asian-affairs.com/Diasporas/wanggungwu.html> (accessed November 14, 2011). See also Prasenjit Duara, "Nationalists among Transnationals," in Ong, and Nonini, eds., *Ungrounded Empires*, 39-60.

imposed labels in their daily lives. For Metro Church members, the ways they conceive themselves ethnically is contingent upon their lived experience, social location, and the types of communities with and in which they interact.

Here, I want to highlight the creation of ethnic boundaries between Malays and Chinese. The differentiation of Malay identity by the Chinese in Malaysia acts as a way to maintain certain boundaries within the confines of Chineseness. Fredrik Barth suggests that the key feature in ethnic identification is the maintenance of ethnic boundaries, and is not so much about internal cultural attributes. By this he means ethnic identities are a form of social organization, rather than a bounded enclosure of cultural expression.²⁵⁷ Barth's work has been pivotal in the development of the constructivist approach which stresses on the socially constructed nature of ethnic identities. In his introduction to the volume, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, published in 1969, Barth identifies ethnic groups as "categories of ascription and identification" that "have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people."²⁵⁸ These categories classify "a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background."²⁵⁹

Through fieldwork among the Pathans in India, Barth discovered that some individuals who were born into the Pathan ethnic group were absorbed into the Baluch

²⁵⁷ The term "ethnic identities" or "ethnic groups" is generally understood in traditional anthropology to designate a population which is biologically self-perpetuating, shares fundamental cultural values, and has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order. This is not too far removed from the traditional view of "race" as culture. See Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

²⁵⁸ Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, edited by Fredrik Barth (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 10.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 13. In this work, Barth outlines a new model of ethnic identity that moves away from a focus on the internal constitution of ethnic groups, or as Barth calls it "the cultural stuff that [groups] encloses." (*Introduction*, 15)

tribes as social and economic circumstances changed and it became more advantageous for them to be identified as part of the Baluch group. Based on his findings, Barth argues that, even in a highly structured society such as India, there is considerable freedom for the social actor to define him or herself as a group member of a particular type:

It makes no difference how dissimilar members may be in their overt behavior - if they say they are A, in contrast to another cognate category B, they are willing to be treated and let their own behavior be interpreted and judged as A's and not as B's; in other words, they declare their allegiance to the shared culture of A's.²⁶⁰

Barth emphasizes that “change of identity takes place where the person's performance is poor and alternative identities are within reach,” and this change results in modifications of unit and boundary organization.²⁶¹

Barth rejects the idea that boundary maintenance is largely an isolated phenomenon without any interaction with other groups. He argues that it is not about shared commonalities and culture; rather, ethnic identities are constructed during the course of interaction and transaction between decision-making individuals:

We can assume no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences. The features that are taken into account are not the sum of ‘objective’ differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant... some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied.²⁶²

Shared cultural affinities within an ethnic group are generated through the process of self-categorization and the categorization of, and by others. It is the production – and reproduction - of difference in relation to the external world that creates the image of

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 15.

²⁶¹ Fredrik Barth, “Pathan Identity and its Maintenance,” in *Ethnic Groups*, 132.

²⁶² Barth, “Introduction,” 14.

internal similarity. Barth's point is that ethnic groups should be conceived in terms of social organization and interaction, rather than as an expression of underlying culture.

As Bourdieu reminds us, *habitus* exists in, through, and because of the practices of actors and their interaction with each other and the rest of their environment, including the various structural givens of social and political contexts. Because of country's colonial legacy, communalism and bounded ethnic categories permeate Malaysian society. For this reason, Metro Church members create boundaries that separate between Chinese and Malay. The physical layout of the city, along with very visible signs of ethnic demarcation serves as reminders for the Chinese that they are different from the Malays. For example, food and dietary choices become a distinctive ethnic marker between Chinese and Malay. In Malaysia, the National Islamic Council is responsible for determining what foods are considered kosher for Malays to consume; foods in grocery stores and restaurants are marked with the *halal* label. Chinese restaurants are not assigned this label because of the presence of pork in their foods.²⁶³ When responding to the question of Chinese characteristics and identity, Metro Church members often answered that they "can eat pork." Not only did they said that they could eat pork, some church members went as far as saying that the Malays were "missing out." I often heard comments on how the Malay people were, by nature, "nice and friendly" people. But they can be easily manipulated. To this end, they fault Malaysia's Islamic religious authorities for being too rigid and legalistic. This implies that the Chinese had more "freedom" and liberties than their Malay counterparts, a separation between Chinese and Malay. Simply

²⁶³ For more information, see Tan, Chee Beng "Ethnic Identities and National Identities: Some Examples from Malaysia," in *Identities* 6, no.4 (2000): 441-480.

put, a relatively regular thing as food consumption takes on a different meaning in Malaysia as it becomes a social and political symbol that demarcates the social boundaries between Malay and Chinese.

Like food, religion also becomes an important marker of ethnic boundaries between Malays and Chinese. Because all Malays are Muslims by birth, the differences between the two ethnic groups are very visible. Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in ethnic sensitivities with the rise of Islamic fundamentalist thinking in Malaysia.²⁶⁴ For example, Malay women are encouraged to wear the *hijab* outside their homes. With such visible markers of identity, it is easy for both ethnic groups to differentiate between a Malay and a Chinese: a Malay person is Malay because they are Muslim; a Chinese person is Chinese because they are not Muslim.²⁶⁵

Even though there is a small minority of Chinese converts to Islam, Malaysian laws require the convert to change his/her name into a Muslim name. Moreover, conversion to Islam entails a total restructuring of one's identity to conform to Malay identity. The Chinese interpret this as a denial of their Chinese heritage and culture; as such, conversion to Islam and inter-ethnic marriages between Chinese and Malay have been few. My informants consistently express the opinion that they would "lose their identities" by converting to Islam. "You have to change your name to a Muslim name,"

²⁶⁴ See Zainah Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah among the Students* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1987); Hussin Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990); Virginia Hooker, and Norani Othman, eds., *Malaysia: Islam, Society and Politics* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003); and Joseph Liow Chinyong, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁶⁵ This also applies to other religious traditions in Malaysia. The recurring stereotype here is that the Chinese are always Taoist, or Buddhist, while Indians are always associated with the Hindu religion. Interestingly, Christianity is the only religion that is viewed as "multi-cultural." Despite this, it is still viewed as a non-Muslim religion, as Malays are highly discouraged from renouncing their Muslim faith.

said one of them. Metro Church members often expressed their frustrations toward the majority Malay ethnic group, and especially the current ruling government, who they feel has manipulated and fired up tensions among various ethnic groups in Malaysia. In such an environment, creating boundaries serve as protection against the majority Malays.²⁶⁶ Barth's theory of ethnicity explains the two groups' coexistence. There are very clear symbolic boundaries between Malays and Chinese and to claim oneself as a member, one must meet all terms of qualification for that particular group. Why the deliberate separation and distinction? As Barth reminds us, the maintenance of boundaries is important in the establishment of ethnic identities.

The "Modern" Chinese and the "Chinese" Chinese

So far, we have explored how Metro Church members differentiate their Chinese ethnic identities by constructing demarcations between Chinese and Malay. While Barth places his emphasis on the maintenance of boundaries between ethnic groups as the key factor in perpetuating ethnic identity, he also assumes that these boundaries are stable and unchanging. In this section, I show the ways in which these boundaries are porous and fluid.²⁶⁷ Metro Church members make choices about their ethnic belonging depending on the social circumstances that benefit them.

²⁶⁶ It is important to mention that even though both Chinese and Malays view each other in homogeneous terms which manifest itself in ethnic stereotypes, there is a tendency to conflate macro and micro-level analysis on ethnic affiliations in Malaysia. Tong Chee Kiong reminds us that in order to gain a better understanding of ethnic relations in Malaysia, it is necessary to differentiate between these two types of analyses. In doing so, we can begin to develop a "more nuanced understanding of relations between the Chinese and Malays in Malaysian society." For more information, see Tong Chee Kiong, *Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia: Racializing Chineseness* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 83-110.

²⁶⁷ Ronald Cohen first suggested that ethnicity is "first and foremost situational." He also contends that identities are constructed and maintained through the interaction and symbols around people that shape

Abner Cohen contends that ethnic identities developed as a response to functional organizational requirements. He believes that ethnicity “operates within contemporary political contexts and is not an archaic survival arrangement carried over into the present by conservative people.”²⁶⁸ Drawing on his fieldwork with Hausa traders in Nigeria, Cohen’s work, particularly his *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*, focuses on the process of “retribalization” among the Hausa community in the wake of decolonization in a region dominated by the Yoruba. Under British colonial rule, the Hausa enjoyed special privileges as cattle traders. While the Hausa were not particularly self-conscious of their tribal heritage, changes in the country’s social and political organization forced them to become increasingly aware that their economic livelihood were contingent on ethnic cohesiveness. No longer afforded special privileges by the independent Nigerian government, the Hausa engaged in a process of retribalization by way of conversion to a particular sect of Islam as a way to maintain their economic status and to demarcate themselves from the Yoruban majority.

For Cohen, ethnic identities are inherently political and related to competition for resources. He moves the discussion from one that conceptualizes ethnicity through the lens of culture to one that focuses on the idea of ethnic identity as a type of informal political organization.²⁶⁹ Cohen’s analysis is helpful in showing how ethnic identities are

their content and perception. So in this sense, Cohen is not disagreeing with Barth per se, only that the concept of “ethnicity” should not be viewed as unchanging. As I will show in this section, even within the group “Chinese,” there are various demarcations taking place. See Ronald Cohen, “Ethnicity: Problem and Focus in Anthropology,” in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 (1978): 379-403.

²⁶⁸ Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 190.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 5. Cohen has taken a step further by divorcing the link between ethnicity and culture. Here, Cohen is interested in conceptualizing ethnicity along the dynamics of economic competition. By

never neutral; they are deployed in the political struggle for power as different communities pursue their own interests. Ultimately, Cohen believes that groups in modern society possess the agency to utilize various symbols (such as kinship and religion) to further their political and economic interests.²⁷⁰

In this case, Metro Church members are trying to disassociate themselves from reified Chinese categories – greedy, money-minded, selfish, and shrewd. These constructed boundaries are political maneuverings to navigate a precarious Malaysian environment. As a political maneuver, Metro Church members create demarcations between what I call the “Modern” Chinese and the “Chinese” Chinese. As Modern Chinese, church members define Modern Chinese as the type of Chinese who have adapted modernity (i.e. a western view) as part of their ethnic identities. In my interviews, I asked my participants how they defined themselves ethnically. Although many did not hesitate in declaring “Chinese” as their answer, the answers come with “qualifiers.” Emily Chang, a recent college graduate and mother of two, lives in the suburbs of Petaling Jaya, a rapidly growing city in the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area.

constructing an ethnic marker that corresponds to groups in competition on the labor market would prove to be more politically advantageous. See Orlando Patterson, “Context and Choice in Ethnic Allegiance: A Theoretical Framework and Caribbean Case Study,” in *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, edited by Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 305-349; Susan Olzak, *The Dynamics of Ethnic Competition and Conflict* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Chai Sun-Ki, “A Theory of Ethnic Group Boundaries,” in *Nations and Nationalism* 2 (1996): 281-307; and Chai Sun-Ki, “Predicting Ethnic Boundaries,” in *European Sociological Review* 21 (2005): 375-391.

²⁷⁰ While Cohen has opened up new avenues in analyzing ethnic identities beyond the constraints of culture, he has also simultaneously limited it to the realm of political actions. He has even gone as far as viewing London stockbrokers as an ethnic group. Nevertheless, by equating ethnic associations strictly as a political vehicle, Cohen has included informal corporate groups as an ethnic group. See Abner Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 90-118. See also Mamadou Diouf, “Engaging Postcolonial Cultures: African Youth and Public Space,” in *African Studies Review* 46, no.2 (2003): 1-12; and Frank Salamone, “Hausa Wrestling in Ibadan capital as an Ethnic Boundary Marker,” in *Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no.3 (2010): 319-333.

She has an undergraduate degree in Counseling Psychology from the United States and is working on her Masters degree in Counseling at a local private college. Emily spends most of her days looking after her children alone while her husband travels around the country for work. She is also an active member of Metro Church, where she serves as an assistant worship leader. When I asked her how she identified herself ethnically, Emily did not hesitate: she is Chinese. Nevertheless, she is quick to delineate that she is not a very “traditional Chinese.” When I asked her what she meant by this, Emily explained that she is a Chinese that did not really follow any Chinese traditions and customs. She gave an example explaining that other than “spending time with the family,” she did not participate in various Chinese New Year celebrations even though she acknowledged the holiday’s importance in defining Chinese identity. As a Modern Chinese, she believes that she is not required to follow all aspects of her Chinese cultural traditions. The idea of choice and voluntariness is an important aspect of a Modern Chinese identity because for church members such as Emily, she does not feel obligated to follow practices she does not understand or have not assigned any meaning to them. My point is, Emily’s Chinese identity is not “stuck” with the cultural givens of the Malaysian Chinese community.

Emily’s nuanced definition of Chineseness is also very similar to Jeremy Lee’s response. A graduate of a local technical institute and young adult father of two, Jeremy runs his own audiovisual business and helps out with the church’s technologic needs. Like Emily, Jeremy also identified himself as a Chinese, but he did not provide a straightforward answer:

I’m quite confident I’m Chinese because I know in Malaysia, everybody knows what race they are. They’re not so integrated... In a way we’re less Chinese in

Malaysia. As a Malaysian... I'm less of a so-called Chinese... Because I'm not educated in the Chinese school. So I'm not very fluent in Mandarin, and I cannot read and write Chinese language.

Jeremy reasoned that because he was not Chinese educated and did not attend Chinese school, he is more “western in thinking.” Jeremy and Emily’s examples demonstrate the ways in which Metro Church members construct boundaries between the Modern Chinese and the Chinese Chinese. What does a Modern Chinese look like? How are they different from the Chinese Chinese? But what does modern mean in relation to Chineseness?

Jeremy’s point on being “western in thinking” is the key to understanding what constitutes a Modern Chinese. Attributes that define a Modern Chinese person in Malaysia include open-mindedness, rationality, and objectivity. These are, in a sense, connected to western ideals. In defining their status as Modern Chinese, my interviewees often informed me that they are not “stuck behind times.” Words such as “progress,” “scientific” and “enlightened” are important components in their definition of Modern Chinese. Further, these words are almost exclusively associated with a western-mindset. For example, Jeremy stressed that a western-centric education would undoubtedly provide problem-solving skills and a scientific, objective mind for knowledge. This is their definition of a Modern Chinese – the type of Chinese people who have embraced modernity, and by extension, western influence in their ethnic identities. As Modern Chinese, church members believe that this ethnic construction would ultimately give them the best chance to succeed in an environment that marginalizes the Chinese community.

What is the political advantage of creating such a demarcation? In maintaining the importance of competition and resource allocation, and building on Barth and Cohen's analyses, some scholars have utilized rational choice theory as a way to further explicate their findings. Originally an approach based on economic models of cost-benefit calculations on human behavior, rational choice theory quickly made its way to ethnic studies. The theory argues that the social actor is an intentional individual acting with the purpose of attaining the ends that are consistent to the individual's hierarchy of needs.

Michael Hechter constructed a model of group solidarity on the basis of individual pursuit of public goods. He argues that rational choice analysis is capable of explaining changes in the social actor's actions and behaviors. According to Hechter, "it can be expected that everyone will prefer more wealth, power, and honor to less, because attaining these goods often makes it easier for individuals to attain other (perhaps more idiosyncratic) goals."²⁷¹ Rational choice theory provides a predictive element in the field of ethnic relations: "[the] law of large numbers allows predictions for the aggregate to be rather precise."²⁷² Hechter argues that ethnic collective action will only arise when groups are receiving benefits. It is not so much social change for the sake of change, but more about what one can get out of a given situation.

Similar to Hechter, Michael Banton is also interested in utilizing rational choice as a testable set of propositions in situations where groups of people make particular sets of choices as opposed to others. With his background in economics at the London School

²⁷¹ Michael Hechter, "A Rational Choice Approach to Race and Ethnic Relations," in *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*, edited by David Mason, and John Rex (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 269.

²⁷² Ibid.

of Economics, he sought to link rationality as the criterion for analyzing the process where people identified with each other within their ethnic groups. In *Racial and Ethnic Competition*, Banton argues that “competition is the critical process shaping patterns of racial and ethnic relations.”²⁷³ Banton outlines his rational choice framework as follows: Firstly, individuals use physical and/or cultural differences to generate groups and categories. As a result, this creates ethnic groups. Secondly, when groups interact, processes of change affect their boundaries which are determined by the magnitude of competition with one another.²⁷⁴

Because the Malay majority has continued to reify and negatively stereotype the Chinese community as money grubbing and unscrupulous people, it becomes necessary for church members to construct boundaries that do not conform to these negative stereotypes. Rational choice theory explains how Metro Church members’ definition of Modern Chinese identity as progressive, rational, and having the best of western ideals, allows for the maximization of success in the social and economic structure of Malaysia.

Kuala Lumpur is a bustling metropolis with many multi-national corporations. A Modern Chinese ethnic identity would provide Metro Church members with more access to employment opportunities since these corporations stress the importance of English as a medium of communication and knowledge of western ways of thinking. More than just access to employment opportunities, a Modern Chinese identity gives them more access

²⁷³ Michael Banton, *Racial and Ethnic Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 12.

²⁷⁴ For a detailed examination of these premises, see Banton, *Racial*, especially “Chapter 6: How Competition Affects Boundaries,” 100-139.

to cultural and social capital, which, according to Bourdieu, could be transformed into other forms of capital.²⁷⁵

Since English is the most widely spoken language in the world, it is advantageous for Metro Church members to master the language. Most private and multi-national corporations in Malaysia require potential employees to have a solid grasp and competency in English. Emily indicated that as a Modern Chinese, she prefers to speak English. Although she can speak Chinese, she did so only with her parents. Meanwhile, Korey Nah grew up in the port city of Klang in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. He is fluent in Chinese and a variety of Chinese dialects. In recalling his childhood days, he remembers speaking Chinese to his grandparents and relatives all the time. When he turned thirteen, his family relocated to the city of Subang Jaya, where a majority of the people living there spoke English as their medium of communication. While in high school, he switched to speaking English as his main language:

You make new friends... and most of the friends in Subang here, they speak English. They're more English educated than Chinese educated. There're still some, but majority of them are English speaking. And I mix with them. It so happens they are my classmates and they became real friends.

Life in Subang Jaya provided Korey with a western immersion. Because his friends are mostly "English educated," he is exposed to western media and entertainment. He appreciates the openness and relationship that "western kids" have with their parents and peers. Korey continues to communicate with his parents in Mandarin, but admits that it is

²⁷⁵ The desire to master English will be explicated fully in the next chapter as I show how conversion to Christianity functions as a powerful form of cultural capital that Metro Church members are able to gain access.

quite “weird” since he “definitely speaks English more than... Chinese.” Korey believes that it was up to the individual to choose how one behaves despite the western influence, be it through friends or through the media. For Korey, openness and individual choice are important concepts which he believes to be products of western influence in his life.

Yet, rational choice theory’s belief in maximizing materialistic claims as the basis for governing human action oversimplifies what constitutes “materialistic claims” by the culturally situated social individual. In addition, it fails to pay attention to inter-group power dynamics as well as between intra-groups. Who stands to benefit more, and at who’s expense? We cannot assume that membership to an ethnic group is based on the converging of a single, homogeneous interest. In other words, one person’s “interests” may not be similar to the other; and if the interests do not align, members of the group will follow a different course of action accordingly. Therefore, rational choice theory reduces people to one-dimensional beings and does not fully capture the workings of such complex groups as Chinese Christians in Malaysia.

In the creation of the Modern Chinese identity, the same negative image that dominant Malays had imposed on the Chinese community in Malaysia is ironically recapitulated by the Metro Church’s Modern Chinese identity against that those I am identifying as the Chinese Chinese. Here, it is important to discuss the meaning and definition of a Chinese Chinese according to Metro Church members. While the label Modern Chinese signifies openness and rationality, Chinese Chinese signifies close-mindedness and irrationality. Jeremy argued that the problem with the Chinese mentality was their lack of innovation, and what he calls “the old way, or the proven way.” For example, he said that the Chinese Chinese have a “don’t rock the boat” mentality. By

this, Jeremy believes that the Chinese Chinese would never think outside the box and engage in risky, yet innovative ideas.

Church members also informed me that the Chinese Chinese are more “traditional” in their thinking, and they described this thinking as inherent in those Chinese that prefer to converse in Chinese language, attend Chinese schools, and adhere more towards traditional Chinese rituals and celebrations. While my interviewees agreed that all Chinese are hardworking and enterprising people, the difference between the Modern Chinese and the Chinese Chinese is that the latter are more “money-minded.” As focused as they are on commercial activities, Metro Church members claimed that the Chinese Chinese are so engrossed in making money that they have become unscrupulous, selfish, and “stuck in their old ways.” Church members described them as stingy, dishonest, superstitious, and behind the times. This is an important point because it implies the Chinese Chinese’s closed-mindedness that is the direct opposite of the progressive-minded Modern Chinese. These descriptions are also remarkably similar to Malay stereotyping of the Chinese community in Malaysia.

Here, we see church members’ tension in negotiating their Chinese ethnic identities. On the one hand, they continue to attach to their inherited cultural patterns such as Chinese values, business savvy, and Chinese language. On the other hand, they also view these as negative attributes of the Chinese Chinese. Given structure of the *habitus*, it is not easy for them to simply jettison these cultural patterns completely. These cultural patterns are reinforced daily in their lives unconsciously and do not change quickly. Thus, group behavior also cannot simply be reduced to actions of individual members since the maintenance of social order is dependent on the “rules of the game.”

Bourdieu charges that rational choice theory misunderstands how social agents operate. People do not live in social vacuums. The Chinese in Malaysia are a historical product of complex cultural mixtures. If maximizing advantages are the main focus of these ethnic identities, why do Metro Church members continue to hold fast to certain Chinese traits and values? Three examples below show how rational choice theory does not fully capture Metro Church member's ethnic identities.

Hailing from the bustling city of Petaling Jaya, Maria Han is a recent college graduate from Australia who works as a technology consultant. She was raised to be an independent woman who is free to make her own choices. Indeed, the idea of voluntariness is tantamount in what church members see as an aspect of the Modern Chinese. Although Maria acknowledged that she is independent and westernized, she did not deny the fact that some Chinese traits remain embedded in her core such as respecting one's elders and filial piety. This is an important insight as it points toward an existence of inherited traits that continue to persist despite her westernized Modern Chinese outlook.

College student Justin Chang also holds his Chinese upbringing in tension with his fascination with western culture. In recalling the Chinese idea of filial piety, he is appalled by the fact that western youths do not treat their elders with the proper respect. For Justin, the idea of calling one's parents by their first name is simply unheard of. At the same time, Justin is taken in by the freedom and openness of western culture. He cites how western parental relations are more egalitarian. I suspect that he desires a type of relationship that is otherwise unavailable due to a rigid Chinese culture that emphasized on respect and order over freedom and openness.

The best example of the negotiated nature of Chineseness comes from Zachary Chin. Born and raised in a small town in the southern state of Johor, he attended college in Kuala Lumpur before heading off to England to further his studies. Upon graduating, he returned home to work as an accountant. Now living in Kuala Lumpur, his entire family attends Metro Church. In terms of the Chinese people, Zachary argued that:

Basically Chinese are good people. And, we're being taught a lot about Chinese philosophy, [and] Chinese culture, which is good, you know? But then... still, because [they're] not so strong, there's still a lot of bad things [happening]. So, I will generalize and say in short, Chinese culture, there's a lot of good, but it's not strong enough... to contain the evil. That's why the evil still, you know, [there's] corruption and all those injustice and unrighteousness and unfairness still happen.

What Zachary means is while Chinese culture has many valuable and good features, it is undermined by the weight of its own traditionalism. The implication here is that his Chinese cultural upbringing was somehow inadequate, even incomplete – “not strong enough.” Still, Zachary maintained that he is still very much Chinese and claimed that the Chinese possess “the best of both worlds.” He believes that the West has many things to offer to the Chinese. He identifies these western features as being open, scientific, and a willingness to cooperate and share knowledge.

Let me return once again to Bourdieu's concept of strategy to help explain this very complex dynamic that Metro Church members are negotiating. Bourdieu understands strategy as a specific orientation of practices and associates strategy with

“maximizing of material and symbolic profit.”²⁷⁶ However, we should not equate strategy as a purposeful and calculated pursuit of benefits such as those proposed by rational choice theorists. Bourdieu argues that social agents do not calculate according to explicit rational and economic criteria. Rather, they operate according to an implicit practical logic and dispositions.²⁷⁷ Individuals do not dictate actions, but rather it is the institutional arrangements set up by groups that specify the appropriate means by which goals are to be pursued. Strategy is rooted in an unconscious practical logic that is the emergent product of *habitus* and fields. Agents individually or collectively deploy strategies to improve or defend their positions in relation with other social agents.

To take Zachary’s example once again, he was raised in a Chinese environment where he watched Chinese movies and learned to appreciate Chinese culture. For Zachary, the *habitus* structures him as a member of the Chinese community in Malaysia. The cultural patterns that have been informed through the *habitus* continue to manifest and exert influence on the structures imposed in his life. However, within this *habitus*, Zachary has the agency to create strategic moves to navigate the murky waters of the social field of Chineseness in Malaysia. Strategy, in this sense, emerges from the *habitus* to alter the structure of the field.

The three examples above demonstrate the tense relationships in negotiating Chinese ethnic identities. On the one hand, my informants are constructing a different type of Chinese ethnic identity. Their identification of “Modern Chinese” is in opposition

²⁷⁶ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 16.

²⁷⁷ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005) in which he critiqued the ahistorical character of the “science” of economics, the myth of the *homo economicus* and the weaknesses in “pure” economic theory and rational choice theory.

with what they perceive as the more traditional Chinese Chinese, whom they believe are backward and less progressive (i.e. less westernized). On the other hand, they still believe that there is much value in identifying as Chinese. The problem with Barth, Cohen, rational choice theory, and the constructivist approach in general is that they tend to ignore the inescapable historical and cultural legacy of the Chinese in Malaysia, that is, the *habitus* that structures the way they understand themselves in the social field. Further, these approaches give too much weight to conscious social agents who come to understand themselves as cultural beings.

Looking Beyond the Primordialist and Constructivist Approach

Ethnic identities are complex and the predominant scholarly approaches are centered on primordialist and constructivist conceptions of identity. Constructivist scholars argue that ethnic identities are not “things” in itself, firmly bounded and unchanging.²⁷⁸ Rather, they are more malleable, fluid, and situational. The social agent possesses the agency to “pick and choose” and construct their identities in the mediation of social relations and negotiation of access to resources. No longer viewing identities as self-bounded entities, the constructivist approach has opened up avenues to the dynamism of ethnic identities. My interviews with Metro Church members demonstrate how their views on Chineseness do not simply reflect the cultural givens of social existence. As a method of maximizing social mobility and economic/social output, a constructivist

²⁷⁸ In other scholarly writings, “constructivist” identity is also known as “instrumentalist,” or “situationalist” forms of identity. I use the word “constructivist” instead to describe the fluid, nebulous nature of identity construction that may or may not be a conscious action. This, I think, captures the complexities of identities better than “instrumentalist,” which seems to indicate that the individual is always conscious of his/her decision in constructing their identities.

approach to ethnic identity shows a clear and conscious separation between a Modern Chinese and a Chinese Chinese. By separating themselves from the Chinese Chinese, they are in fact jettisoning what they felt as unmodernistic aspects of Chinese identity – aspects that they felt hindered them from acquiring economic and cultural capital.

While the constructivist approach can certainly address the shortcomings of the primordialist approach, nevertheless, primordial attachments continue to persist.

The primordial approach maintains that identities are fixed with clearly drawn boundaries. There are intrinsic features at the core of one's identity. This approach stresses how ineffable structures dictate the way people identify and group themselves.²⁷⁹ As I indicated earlier, Metro Church members continue to view some characteristics that make them Chinese as non-negotiable and durable. As much as constructivist-minded scholars would like to insist that identities are formed as a way to maximize resource collection, constructivist explanations are unable to explain the durability of primordial and essentialized categories in ethnic identities. Further, even though the analyses of the economic and political dimensions of ethnicity are immensely useful, it is reductionist, and can lead to an excessively deterministic view of identity. These analyses neglect cultural, psychological, and symbolic meanings behind identity markers.

²⁷⁹ A major criticism of the primordial approach is that it does not provide answers in explaining to why some affiliations are ineffable or basic. Further, the primordial approach does not explain the functionality behind such affiliations. More importantly, it presents a model of ethnicity that is static, ahistorical, and essentialist. In Jack Eller and Reed Coughlan's essay, "The Poverty of Primordialism: The Demystification of Ethnic Attachments," they point their criticisms toward the primordial approach in as providing a "picture of underived and socially-constructed emotions that are unanalyzable and overpowering." See Jack Eller, and Reed Coughlan, "The Poverty of Primordialism: The Demystification of Ethnic Attachments," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16, no.2 (1993): 183-202.

I want to highlight how complex human beings can be, with their abilities to seemingly hold different *and* contradicting ideas in their minds. This is something *both* primordial and constructivist theories of ethnic identities have failed to recognize.²⁸⁰

I am in agreement with the constructivist approach, and more than likely, I would locate myself on that side of the scholarly debate. Here, I want to briefly refer back to Rogers Brubaker. While generally a proponent of constructivist approaches to identity, Brubaker notes that the constructivist school generates a “soft” perspective on identity that has little to no analytical purchase. In addition, he argues that in an attempt to exorcize any essentialist (i.e. primordialist) elements from the scholarship on ethnicity, the constructivist approach has become so porous and multifaceted that it fails to count for anything at all. By this, he believes that a “soft” constructivist theory of identity fails to examine why essentialist claims to identities continue to proliferate, therefore losing much of its analytical power.²⁸¹ Brubaker suggests that it is best to talk about identification rather than identities. Through the conception of identification, Brubaker wants to shift the focus to examine ethnicity as a process and “to specify the agents that do the identifying.”²⁸² Similar to Brubaker, postcolonial studies is dedicated towards uncovering these “agents” and power regimes that do the identifying.

²⁸⁰ For more information, see Alexander J. Motyl, “The Social Construction of Social Construction: Implications for Theories of Nationalism and Identity Formation,” in *Nationalist Papers* 38, no.1 (2010): 59-71.

²⁸¹ Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 38. In a cacophony of ideas, analyses, and scholarship, Brubaker suggests that it is best to talk about identifications rather than identities. Brubaker proposes something new altogether, that is, by incorporating cognitive sciences to the study of identity. While this is definitely commendable, and deserves further exploration, this dissertation will not pursue Brubaker’s cause. For more information, see especially “Chapter 3: Ethnicity and Cognition,” 64-87.

²⁸² Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 41.

A Postcolonial Contribution to Identity

Contemporary scholarship on identity is beginning to address how the experience of colonialism has affected identity formation among postcolonial nations.²⁸³ In particular, how does the traumatic experience of colonialism affect the formation of identities among the colonized? The questions raised by postcolonial scholars make it apparent that there is more going on in identity construction than adequately explained via economic, psychological, social, and rationalistic terms. Rather, the way in which the colonized are positioned and subjected originates from the exercise of power and cultural production. As Foucault reminds us, every exercise of knowledge and representation is a formation of power regimes. In taking up Foucault's concept of biopower as a method of controlling and assigning categories in groups, there is a need thus to interrogate these power regimes that has come to represent and dominate the colonized. Thus, while retaining its constructivist roots, the postmodern and postcolonial shift in theoretical approaches to ethnic identity are now leaning more towards deconstructing social meanings and emphasizing on the social actor rather than a focus on macro-sociological and material-based theories.²⁸⁴

Knowing now that identity is not one thing or unified, postcolonial scholars articulate a theory that conceptualizes identity as one that is *becoming*. This approach pays attention to the discontinuities and ruptures of identity formation in the

²⁸³ Since this project is an interrogation of an aspect of postcolonial studies itself (namely on hybrid identities), I have reserved a large chunk of the discussion on Chapter Five of the dissertation. For now, this section serves to point out how postcolonial approaches to the study of ethnic identity are very much aligned towards the constructivist approach.

²⁸⁴ Stephen Spencer, *Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 134.

identification process. Stuart Hall argues that while there are many points of similarities, there are also many points of differences that constitute identities. Drawing mainly from the experience of the black diaspora in the Caribbean, Hall contends that there are:

ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness.' Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.²⁸⁵

Hall asserts that cultural identity does not have a fixed origin or a pristine primordial past to which people could return to. It is the realization that identities are intertwined, imagined, factual and fictive. Above all, identities are about positioning. Ultimately, Hall argues for a theorization of identity as "a form of representation which is able to constitute... new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak."²⁸⁶ Hence, there will always be a political element attached to this endeavor.

Through the contribution of postcolonial studies, we can see how ethnic identities can function as a political resource deployed by marginalized communities in the struggle against the structures of oppression. Seen this way, identities are never neutral. To return to my research context, Metro Church members' constructions of the Modern Chinese

²⁸⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 225. Together with Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall would pioneer what would be called Black British Cultural Studies (or Black Atlantic Studies) which began in the 1980s. Since then, there has been a growth in literature on Black Caribbean identities and Black diaspora identities. See also Stuart Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Black Popular Culture*, edited by Gina Dent, (Seattle: Bay, 1992), 21-36; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Annalisa Oboe, *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2008); Michelle Stephens, "What is This *Black* in Black Diaspora?" in *Small Axe* 13, no.2 (2009): 26-38; and Henry Louis Gates, *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

²⁸⁶ Hall, "Cultural Identity," 236-7.

category function as a deliberate positioning which they believe would offer them the best potential to rise above and resist Malaysia's essentialist view of the Chinese. Yet, as I have already mentioned, in doing so, they create demarcations toward the Malays, but more importantly with the Chinese Chinese. Even though the Chinese Chinese share the experience of colonization and marginalization, Metro Church members, who demarcate themselves as what I call the Modern Chinese, continue to perpetuate the same mechanisms that essentialize the Chinese Chinese.²⁸⁷ Even as the Modern Chinese are constructing Chinese identity that resists the dominant essentializing of Chinese identities in Malaysia, they are reinscribing the very same essential categories imposed on them by the dominant Malays to the Chinese Chinese.

While I do not wish to downplay the importance of the postcolonial approach to the study of ethnic identities since the struggle against marginalization in Malaysia continues, I question how identity formation is increasingly associated with a site of political struggle. Indeed, postcolonial studies is deeply entrenched within the domination/marginalization dynamic, or what Lawrence Grossberg calls the “‘colonial model’ of the oppressor and oppressed and the ‘transgression model’ of oppression and resistance.”²⁸⁸ Thus, postcolonial approach on identity ignores the heterogeneity of power

²⁸⁷ Spivak's seminal article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” captures this conundrum beautifully. The double bind that the postcolonial subject finds him/herself in (in this case, the Chinese Chinese) threatens to render their voices mute. Still, following Derrida's footsteps, she contends that it is virtually impossible for anyone, even within members of an ethnic group, to adequately represent the views of the whole group. This also includes academics who study these groups. Together with the Chinese members of Metro Church, we are unlikely to more than recapitulate the familiar discourses of domination, left behind either by the British, the Malay-majority, or Metro Church members. As I have shown throughout the chapter, Chinese ethnic identities in Malaysia are not unitary, but rather heterogeneous in its outlook. Who gets to represent each other? It is fair to say then that we are stuck in a “Catch-22” situation.

²⁸⁸ Lawrence Grossberg, “Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall, and Paul du Gay (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1996), 88.

within the marginalized groups themselves. If we take these assertions seriously, then it appears that scholars of identity who are influenced by postcolonialism may run the risk of overreaching to “rescue” and assign agency to marginalized peoples. Reality is complex, and at the heart of this matter is the question of whether there is some sort of self-conscious agency by marginalized peoples or if they are victims of the mechanisms that transform human beings into subjects. The answer surely has to lie somewhere in the middle. This is precisely why Bourdieu is useful in my analysis. His work moves beyond the theoretical views of primordial structuralism and constructive functionalism. Bourdieu’s theoretical principles cast a different perspective on ethnic identities as dynamic and relational.

In the case of the Metro Church, informed by their *habitus*, members maintain primordial attachments of their Chinese identities while at the same time adopt a constructive aspect of their Chineseness. This is not a clear-cut separation but a messy endeavor, one that is filled with conflict and contradiction. As a historical byproduct of complex mixing of socio-economic and cultural adaptations, the Chinese in Malaysia have come to understand their ethnic identities at a pre-conscious level. The cultural patterns that have been informed through the *habitus* continue to manifest and exert influence on the structures that are imposed in their lives. While this might sound deterministic, Bourdieu believes that circumstances may alter these patterns. Nevertheless, the most basic understanding of the “rules of the game” do not change easily or quickly, because they are constantly reinforced in numerous ways in numerous domains of their lives.

It is important to note that for Bourdieu, practices and behaviors do not generate out of a social vacuum. Rather, they are structured in social contexts called fields which act as social arenas of struggle over the appropriation of capital. For Bourdieu, capital should not be conceived in along classic Marxist conceptions. Rather, other forms of capital exist including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital; *habitus* is formed in accordance with particular types of capital. For example, those who have massive economic capital but less cultural capital are unlikely to invest in such things as art, music, and higher education. Depending on the situation, Metro Church members may emphasize or downplay different aspects of their Chinese identity for political, economic, or cultural gains/survival. Yet, in the struggle for capital, someone is bound to lose out. This will become more apparent in the following chapter as I explore how Christianity becomes a powerful form of cultural capital. There are repercussions in privileging certain markers of Chineseness, especially when those who are doing the privileging are urban dwelling Chinese with vast amount of capital.

Implications and Conclusion

When it comes to the studies on identity formation, we should not be satisfied with descriptive enterprises. Rather, we should be asking, in addition to descriptions, how the process of identification elevates, denies, or negates certain markers of identity. In my own research context, how does the process of identification include or exclude other Chinese groups in Malaysia? There is power involved in the process of identification, and the identities constructed by Metro Church members have direct repercussions in intra-ethnic relations. Unequal belonging demonstrates how power no longer resides in the

exclusive property of repressive apparatuses. Rather, power manifests itself even among marginalized communities.

The literature on identity formation tends to pose a binary opposition between voluntary identity on the one hand, and involuntary identity on the other hand; either identity is constructed, or it is ascribed. More importantly, it is the question of how much freedom and awareness do social actors maintain in the identification process. Do they possess agency? On the one hand, scholars such as Foucault argue that there is little self-awareness for social actors to maneuver due to their own perceived subjection. In explaining the idea of the Panopticon, he argues that those who are “subjected to a field of visibility, and... knows it, assume responsibility for the constraints of power; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.”²⁸⁹ On the other hand, scholars attempt to rescue the individual by highlighting how individual acts of resistance may not necessarily appear on the surface.²⁹⁰ Beneath the surface of compliance towards authority is an undercurrent of ideological resistance. For example, the idea of the agential resistive agent has captured the minds of many postcolonial writers who argue that hybrid

²⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 202-203. See also the works of Judith Butler, especially *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge: 2006); and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

²⁹⁰ See for example, James C. Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Interestingly, drawing on his fieldwork from Malay peasants in Northern Malaysia, Scott argues that far from being a subjected group, oppressed groups have not consented to domination in the same vein as Gramsci’s notion of hegemony; hegemonic ideas are always the subject of conflict, and are continually being reconstructed; resistance is rooted in everyday material goals rather than in a “revolutionary consciousness.” His follow-up work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) utilizes the term “hidden transcripts” as a way to describe the invisible forms of resistance and critique of power/domination in which the oppressors and power holders are not aware of. Scott argues that one should pay more attention to hidden forms of agency and resistance among marginalized community that lies beneath the surface of public forms of behavior.

identities can act as a method of resistance. But this still assumes that the social actor possesses the necessary agency to do so.

Throughout this chapter, I analyzed the construction of ethnic identities among the Chinese in Malaysia. As a minority group, they continue to find utility and emotional connection with their Chinese cultural “givens” as well as acknowledging the fluid dimensions of their ethnic identities. Weaving together interview narratives and an examination of various theories of ethnic identity, I argued that the way the Chinese negotiate and make sense of their identity goes beyond a primordialist/constructivist paradigm. Ethnicity cannot be reduced to individual choice; but it cannot be reduced to what Brubaker calls bounded groups either. Like the members of Metro Church, they are engaged in strategic maneuvering to maximize material and symbolic profit. As such, they create demarcations and identify themselves as what I call Modern Chinese – progressive, modern, and western; this is in contrast with the Chinese Chinese – backward, traditional, and old-fashioned. To reduce human behavior to biological workings on the one hand and mere pragmatism on the other hand ignores the human capacity to operate at very complex level. To address such issues, it is necessary to move towards a theoretical framework that begins to capture the complexities of identity formation on a more contextual *and* processual level. As I have mentioned earlier, Bourdieu offers a more complex analysis. His conceptions of the field, *habitus*, and practice are especially useful to understanding the formation of ethnic identities among the Chinese in Malaysia.

In concluding this chapter, there is one other territory left unexplored – religion. Despite being a minority religion in Malaysia, Pentecostalism is one of the fastest

growing Christian sects in Malaysia. For Metro Church members, their choice of religion plays a key role in reconstituting their Chinese identities as well as granting them access to capital. Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts will prove just as useful in the examination of the religious field and illuminate my argument of unequal belonging. The following chapter explores what they gained from being part of a religious group that is not highly favored by the local authorities in Malaysia.

CHAPTER FOUR: CHRISTIANITY, CULTURAL CAPITAL, AND UNEQUAL ACCESS

When I was eight years old, my father decided to take me to Sunday School at a nearby church because it would be “good for me to have some religion.” The church was located on the second floor of a shop lot. There were no tall spires or stained glass windows to greet or inspire me. Since I only attended Sunday School, I was mostly oblivious to the rituals of a regular Sunday service – communion, sermon, tithing or offering. With some instances of singing and Bible stories, Sunday School was mostly a time for me to play games and socialize with friends.

By the time I became a teenager, I felt that I had grown out of Sunday School, so I left the church. Meanwhile, my relatives and cousins had other ideas. As staunch believers in the physical manifestation of the Spirit of God in their lives, they occasionally invited me and my family to special worship services at their church. This was one of my earliest exposures to Pentecostal Christianity. I vividly remembered how uncomfortable and awkward I felt as the only one who did not feel the spirit or speak in tongues. Interestingly, I converted to Evangelical Christianity while I was attending college in the United States. I quickly became involved with ministry work on campus. However, things began to change when I started attending graduate school. Frustrated with how my fellow Christians were uncritical of the dynamics of race, class, and gender,

my once secure knowledge of Christianity – sin, Jesus, hell, atonement, Satan, etc. – were challenged.

On one of my return trips home to Malaysia, I visited my relatives' church to satisfy and respect my elders' request. My experience with that visitation was a mixture of awe, confusion, and discomfort. I was not sure if it was the conservatism that bothered me or the fact that they were more westernized than many of the white Christians that I went to church with in the United States. And so, twelve years after my conversion to Christianity, I am returning to the site where I first became acquainted with Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity.

To be an English-speaking Chinese in Malaysia is to occupy a precarious position. Politically and ethnically, the Chinese are a minority group; being a Christian also positions them as a religious minority. Nevertheless, Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, is one of the fastest growing religions in Malaysia today. What is the appeal of Christianity? In the previous chapter, I explored how Metro Church members reinscribe their Chineseness as a strategy to resist the essentializing categories associated with the Chinese in Malaysia. Thus, Metro Church members demarcate what I call Modern Chinese and Chinese Chinese. Church members identify themselves as Modern Chinese and deploy this as a marker for progressive, modern, and western-centric Chinese identity. However, these strategies, following Bourdieu, are neither wholly unconscious nor simply the result of rational calculation; it is a dialogical relationship where *habitus* and field informs one another. To this end, Chineseness goes beyond a primordial/constructive dichotomy. Instead, a processual and strategic outlook presents a

more accurate way in analyzing Chinese ethnic identities. Ultimately, this demonstrates that hybrid identities are not always resistive or liberative. Rather, the unequal distribution of cultural capital maintains an intra-ethnic oppression among the Chinese.

Given the minority status of Christianity in Malaysia, what are the benefits of embracing this religion? In this chapter, I examine how members of Metro Church negotiate their identities as Chinese and Christian. They form complex relationships involving religion, culture, and ethnicity. In postcolonial studies, Christianity is a (neo)colonial enterprise that displaces indigenous cosmologies in a hegemonic manner.²⁹¹ I mostly agree with this assessment; Christianity can be hegemonic and often functions as a vehicle for the “colonization of the mind.” However, I would like to move the discussion in a different direction. I contend that Christianity is not a tool of colonization or an instrument of liberation but as a vehicle for socializing members into adopting certain orientations and practices in relation to their surroundings. Christianity is a lens through which they restructure their Chinese identities. Hybrid identities do not necessarily indicate resistance or compliance with structures of oppression.

²⁹¹ See for example, Jean Comaroff, and John Comaroff, “Christianity and Colonialism in South Africa,” in *American Ethnologist* 13, no.1 (1986): 1-22; George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993); Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002); Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Andrew N. Porter, ed., *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880-1914* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004); H. Henrietta Stockel, *Salvation Through Slavery: Chiricahua Apaches and Priests on the Spanish Colonial Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008); Amos Yong, and Barbara Zikmund, eds., *Remembering Jamestown: Hard Questions about Christian Mission* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010); and Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar, and Connie A. Shem, eds., *Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

Using Bourdieu's concept of capital, I argue that Christianity is a powerful form of cultural capital.²⁹² Specifically, one's mastery in English and western ideals endows church members with this capital. Christianity confers Metro Church with access to power even though they are marginalized within Malaysian society. I do not mean this simply as a matter of amassing power in terms of Chinese resistance against the Malays. Rather, it should be understood as what Heidi Dahles calls "the optimization of access to resources through... cultural means."²⁹³ In addition, access to cultural capital is ambiguous because it creates unequal belonging. It is limited because not everybody has access to it. It is very difficult to come by for the Chinese who are not fluent in English or familiar with western ways. Seen this way, Metro Church members' construction of hybridized identities reinforces unequal belonging.

First, I will discuss Bourdieu's concept of capital and how it could be applied in Metro Church's context. Then, I will contextualize Christianity in Malaysia. This is important because it sets the stage for the ways in which Metro Church members construct their hybridized religious identities. Using conversion narratives of my informants, I show how these narratives are processes and active affairs. With

²⁹² Although I concentrate mostly on cultural capital, I am aware that there are other forms of capital that church members stand to gain by converting to Christianity. In particular, social capital, which, according to Bourdieu, is "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition," (*Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 119) is an important resource for Metro Church members (and American evangelical congregations). Though important, this chapter will not be analyzing social capital. See for example, Robert Putnam, Lewis Feldstein, and Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004) especially "Chapter 6: Saddleback Church: From Crowd to Congregation," 119-141; Scott Thuma, and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What we can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (Edison: Jossey-Bass, 2007); and Omri Elisha, *Moral Ambition: Mobilization and Social Outreach in Evangelical Megachurches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

²⁹³ Heidi Dahles, "In Pursuit of Capital: The Charismatic Turn among the Chinese Managerial and Professional Class in Malaysia," in *Asian Ethnicity* 8, no.2 (2007): 106.

conversion, church members are also readapting their Chinese traditions. This active conversion to Christianity reflects a type of empowerment and self-assertion among Metro Church members to invest and generate a very powerful form of cultural capital. Finally, I show how access to this capital is unequal by examining the privileging of western ideals and English as examples of cultural capital, reifying instead of resisting structures of oppression.

Capital and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

One of Bourdieu's significant contributions to social theory is his notion of capital. Related to the acquisition of capital is the "internalized form of the class condition and of the conditionings," *habitus*, which enables the social actor to know the world, acquired through active socialization and upbringing, without thinking about it, to react to different cultural stimuli, and to make judgments on what is considered vulgar or gaudy rather than dignified or beautiful.²⁹⁴

Cultural capital is applicable to religious participation. This is one area where Metro Church members can gain social mobility. In a context where the Chinese lack access to political power, yet are successful in economic realms, cultural capital becomes the most flexible component for gaining social power. Cultural capital refers to symbolic goods existing in the mode of linguistic and cultural competence. Bourdieu conceptualized capital existing in various material and non-material forms.²⁹⁵ According

²⁹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 101.

²⁹⁵ Although not the first to develop this idea, it was Bourdieu who designed a comprehensive theory of, and gave prominence to non-material forms of capital. Most notably, human capital theory has

to Bourdieu, society is as a multi-dimensional space comprised of intersecting and conflicting fields. It is within all of these overlapping fields that humans assert themselves as individuals and/or as members of a group. The individuals in these fields develop particular sets of dispositions which in turn provide them access to particular types of capital. The religious field is a competitive structure which determines both the form and representation of religious dynamics. In “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” Bourdieu argues that religion serves two social functions: first, to legitimize the current social order, and second, to orientate social agents with the means to make sense of their position in the social order.²⁹⁶

For Bourdieu, cultural capital is a “long-lasting disposition of the mind and body” that implies “a labor of inculcation and assimilation.”²⁹⁷ He describes cultural capital as existing in three forms:

in the “embodied” state, i.e. in the form of long lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematic, etc., and in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee.²⁹⁸

been utilized since the 1960s in economic and sociological studies. See for example, Jacob Mincer, “Investment in Human Capital and Personal Income Distribution,” in *The Journal of Political Economy* 66, no.4 (1958): 281-302; Theodore Schultz, “Investment in Human Capital,” in *American Economic Review* 51, no.1 (1961): 1-17; and Gary Becker, *Human Capital* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1964).

²⁹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” in *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991): 31-38.

²⁹⁷ Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital,” 243-244.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

Cultural capital refers to the forms of knowledge, skills, and education which give the social actor mobility and access to other forms of capital. Individual dispositions and competencies give privileged access to such capital in its “objectified” form of cultural artifacts, and in turn institutionalized in the form of professional qualifications. Accordingly, institutionalized cultural capital plays the most prominent role in converting cultural capital into economic capital.

Bourdieu’s concern in relation to cultural capital is with its conversion, transmission, and accumulation in ways that perpetuate social inequalities. It is the combination of institutional control over forms of capital, coupled with processes of conversion and transmission that are crucial to the capacity of dominant classes to maintain their position, and therefore to social reproduction. This is important because it shows that linguistic or cultural competence is not the result of natural aptitude. Some people have a preexisting head start over others based varied processes of socialization that is acquired through the *habitus* including privileges from educational and economic opportunities. Bourdieu’s theory is essential in my analysis of Metro Church members because it begins to show that the actions of church members cannot simply be explained in individual terms, that is, as full social agents. Rather, they are based on relationships and interplay between individuals and larger social structures. Access to cultural capital among Malaysian Christians is limited because they are constrained and enabled by the *habitus* and field. The religious life of Chinese Christians in Malaysia is a field in which various forms of capital are both invested and generated in interactive processes between and among adherents of Metro Church.

Even though Bourdieu focuses his analysis on the protection and reproduction of status and privilege, I do not wish to cast capital purely in a negative manner. Indeed, he is concerned with cultural capital as a tool of the elite to exclude those who do not belong. Bourdieu's primary concern with religion is in its institutionalized form where the church and other religious institutions that legitimate capital, promote it, and bestow power and privilege on authorized users and producers of this capital. In his framework, it is the religious specialists that form the "exclusive holders of the specific competence necessary for the production and reproduction of a *deliberately organized corpus* of secret (and therefore rare) knowledge," while the laity are objectively "dispossessed of *religious capital*."²⁹⁹ Thus, authentic religious producers are the official institutional specialists while the laity can only consume but not supply religious meanings.

However, Bourdieu's analysis of religion is based on a top-down understanding of cultural production; priests and church hierarchies control the shape and dissemination of religious ideas while lay people can only consume these ideas. We may fault Bourdieu's negative views of religion on his experience and observation of the French Catholic church's monopolizing tendencies. In addition, the French Catholic context is vastly different from Asian Pentecostalism; power operates differently from these two contexts; there is less clear-cut separation between Metro Church's "religious hierarchy" and the laity. Indeed, Bradford Verter argues that Bourdieu's "Voltairean vision of religious exploitation distracts him from looking at more subtle dynamics [of religion]."³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure," 9. Original emphasis included.

³⁰⁰ Bradford Verter, "Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu," in *Sociological Theory* 21, no.2 (2003): 157.

To see religion in a negative manner is unhelpful in recognizing a potentially powerful tool that marginalized communities could utilize to affect social change.³⁰¹ For Chinese Malaysians, converting to Christianity can potentially help them in the struggle against marginalization by the dominant Malays. Thus, religious specialists are not only the disseminators of truth. Rather, non-religious specialists (i.e. the laity) have as much agency in producing the “goods of salvation” in the religious marketplace.³⁰² Nevertheless, this potential is limited and only accessible to a few. While I agree that the top-down model of religious domination understate how religious practitioners construct religious meaning in their day-to-day lives, I insist that power and inequality continues to manifest themselves in the Malaysian Chinese community even though they are a collectively marginalized group. More importantly, the Malaysian context shows how power and the accumulation of capital in all forms and permutations operate in complex and multi-directional ways.

³⁰¹ While Bourdieu’s theory of capital is pessimistic, other scholars have tried to see social and cultural capital in a more positive light. In particular, sociologist James Coleman has attempted to approach capital in a broader view where it is not only seen as a tool of the elite, but can also be utilized by all kinds of communities including the powerless and marginalized. I have already eluded to Verter’s article earlier on his critique on Bourdieu’s writings on religion. For other examples of critiques on Bourdieu’s theoretical limitations with regards to religion, see Terry Ray, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2007); Michelle Dillon, “Pierre Bourdieu, Religion, and Cultural Production,” in *Cultural Studies <--> Critical Methodologies* 1, no.4 (2001): 411-429; Nick Crossley, *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001); and Andrew McKinnon, Marta Trzebiatowska, and Christopher Craig Brittain, “Bourdieu, Capital, and Conflict in a Religious Field: The Case of the ‘Homosexuality’ Conflict in the Anglican Communion,” in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no.3 (2011): 355-370.

³⁰² For more information, see Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); Cristian Parker, *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996); and Erwan Dianteill, “Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Religion: A Central and Peripheral Concern,” in *After Bourdieu: Influence, Critique, Elaboration*, edited by David Swartz, and Vera Zolberg (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 65-85.

Pentecostalism's Background and Historical Context in Malaysia

It is particularly important to ground this study in the history of Pentecostalism in its Malaysian context. The Pentecostal church is a product of the English-speaking ministry with an influx of urban Chinese professionals. The *habitus* that structures this denomination produces patterns of behavior and logical actions, i.e. practices that are connected to a given field. Here, I will briefly explain how Pentecostalism became a product of an English-speaking ministry. This will then illuminate the opportunities and social inequalities that are present in Metro Church.

Pentecostalism first made its mark in Malaysia in the early twentieth century. Specifically, the Assemblies of God (AOG) denomination traces its origins with the arrival of an American missionary, Carrie P. Anderson, in Kuala Lumpur in 1934. Fluent in Chinese, Anderson focused her ministry on the Chinese immigrant community and operated primarily in the cities.³⁰³ As the ministry grew steadily, other missionaries began arriving from the United States to assist her work. Due to British colonial policy of discouraging inter-ethnic mingling, missionaries carried out their work and set up churches along ethnic lines. With regards to the Chinese community, AOG churches formed as separate Chinese-speaking and English-speaking congregations. Although

³⁰³ To be sure, the earliest Pentecostal influence in Malaysia came much earlier in the form of the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission (CPM) which worked predominantly among Indian and Ceylonese migrant workers in 1930. The CPM began in the town of Ipoh, four hours north of Kuala Lumpur which then spread southward to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. The CPM is predominantly an Indian church with very few Chinese members. I will not be discussing the Indian Pentecostal church in detail. I do want to point out however, that the Pentecostal movement in Malaysia began, grew, and developed along ethnic and linguistic lines according to the geographical segregation of Malaysia's different ethnic groups. This resulted in the formation of Chinese-speaking, English-speaking, and Tamil-speaking congregations. See Chris Thomas, *Diaspora Indians: Church Growth among Indians in West Malaysia* (Penang: MIEC, 1978); and "The Biography of Pastor Paul," <http://www.pentecostmedia.com/PasPaul.htm>, (accessed February 28, 2013). As I will also show in this chapter, it is the growth of English-speaking Pentecostal churches had significant impact in Malaysia because of its proximity to the cities, and the type of Christians that attend these congregations, which includes Metro Church.

ministry among Chinese-speaking communities flourished from the 1930s to the 1960s, it quickly became surpassed by the English-speaking ministry with the founding of the Bible Institute of Malaya (later renamed Bible College of Malaysia, BCM) in the 1960s.³⁰⁴

The early graduates of BCM became church pioneers, ministers, and evangelists, establishing AOG churches around the country. By the 1970s, the AOG began penetrating student groups around schools and universities in the cities; Chinese youths made up a significant portion of AOG churches and fuelled the Charismatic movement.³⁰⁵ The rise of the Charismatic movement was followed by a spurt in growth of English-speaking AOG congregations around the country, especially in the Klang Valley.³⁰⁶ In the 1980s, a second wave of charismatic renewal began to influence older

³⁰⁴ Briefly, the Chinese-speaking ministry centers on John Sung's revival meetings among Chinese communities in major Malaysian and Singaporean cities in the 1930s. With the declaration of Malayan Emergency in 1948, AOG missionary work turned primarily toward Chinese and Chinese-speaking congregations. Coincidentally, Mao's communist regime in China closed its doors on AOG missionary activity. Given their knowledge in Chinese and Chinese culture, they took this opportunity to serve the social and religious needs of these new communities in Malaysia. Another popular figure among the Chinese-speaking Pentecostal ministry was Kong Duen Yee, a former actress from Hong Kong. Her antagonistic style of ministry caused a stir among the Chinese community in Malaysia when she openly condemned the Chinese gods. Kong's Chinese ministry created a negative effect on Chinese-speaking Pentecostal churches which led to its marginalization. Of course, this is not to say that the Chinese ministry is "dead" per se. Rather, I am pointing out how the Chinese ministry and English ministry developed and moved along different trajectories. For more information, see Tan Jin Huat, "Pentecostals and Charismatics in Malaysia and Singapore," in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, edited by Allen Anderson, and Edmund Tang (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2005), 281-306; John Sung, *The Diaries of John Sung – An Autobiography*, trans. Stephen L. Sheng (Brighton: Luke H. Sheng & Stephen L. Sheng, 1995); Derek Tan, "The Assemblies of God," in *Christianity in Malaysia*, edited by John Hunt, Lee Kam Hing, and John Roxborough, (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992), 229-242; and Leslie Lyall, *A Biography of John Sung* (Singapore: ARMOUR Publishing, 2004).

³⁰⁵ Tan, "Pentecostals and Charismatics," in *Asian and Pentecostal*, 291.

³⁰⁶ Klang Valley is the designation for the areas comprising of the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, its suburbs and adjacent cities. This is also known as the Greater Kuala Lumpur area or Metropolitan Kuala Lumpur. The Klang Valley is the most populous area in the country.

professionals and businessmen with better economic resources. It is in this context that Metro Church first came into existence.

For many Malaysian Chinese living in the city, interactions with various cultural, political, and social influences are the norm, and they shape how the Chinese make sense of the world, and, in effect, their identities. Traditionally, Malaysian Chinese align themselves with a variety of Chinese religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. However, recent trends have seen a steady rise of Christian converts among the Chinese, especially to Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity.³⁰⁷ According to the ASEAN Statistical Yearbook of 2005, it was estimated that the Christian population in Malaysia more than quadrupled from 220,000 to 2,000,000 between 1970 and 2000.³⁰⁸ Pentecostalism is a relative “newcomer” among other established Christian

³⁰⁷ Here, I am using the terms “Pentecostal” and “Charismatic” interchangeably. In general these terms denote a type of Christianity that emphasizes a “spirit-filled” religion, that is, the outward manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. I am also aware that these terms have vastly broad meanings ranging from “classical” Pentecostalism and a wide variety of other charismatic and spirit-centered movements, such as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. For more information on its usages under the umbrella term “Pentecostal Christianity,” see Russell Spittler, “Are Pentecostals and Charismatics Fundamentalists? A Review of American Uses of these Categories,” in *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*, edited by Karla Poewe (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 103-116; Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Walter J. Hollenweger, “An Introduction to Pentecostals,” in *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 25, no.2 (2004): 125-137; and Allan Anderson, *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). For specific information on the rise of Pentecostalism in the Malaysian context, see Susan Ackerman, “Experimentation and Renewal among Malaysian Christians: The Charismatic Movement in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya,” in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 12 (1984): 35-48; Raymond Lee, and Susan Ackerman, *Sacred Tensions: Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997); and Robbie Goh, “Asian Christian Networks: Transnational Structures and Geopolitical Mappings,” in *Journal of Religion and Society* 6 (2004): 1-13.

³⁰⁸ “Chapter 1: Population and Demography,” *ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2005*, <http://www.aseansec.org/18175.htm> (accessed March 2, 2013).

denominations in Malaysia, and the Pentecostal boom in the 1970s created a decidedly more localized, independent, and charismatic form of Pentecostalism.³⁰⁹

Christianity is growing rapidly among Chinese and Indians because these groups are among the few that are available for proselytization. Because Islam is Malaysia's official religion, proselytizing to the Malay population is illegal and the government keeps a tight watch on any Christian activity that might be perceived as threatening Muslim and, by extension, Malay culture and political power.³¹⁰ Any attempt to evangelize to Malays is perceived as a potential spark for social unrest that threatens the Malay community and the primacy of Islam as Malaysia's official religion. With the rise of Islamization in the 1970s and 1980s, religious tensions in the country have increased.³¹¹

³⁰⁹ By this, I refer to the fact that many Pentecostal churches in Malaysia today, while continuing to employ western theological and ecclesial rhetoric, are not under the control of the "parent" western church, at least not under the vein of nineteenth century western missionary enterprise. Christianity previously associated itself along established mainline denominations, and usually as a holdover of the colonial missionary enterprise. For a comprehensive history of Christianity in Malaysia, especially with regards to Anglicanism, Methodism and Catholicism, see Hunt, Lee, and Roxborough, eds., *Christianity in Malaysia*. Also see Theodore R. Doraisamy, *The March of Methodism in Singapore and Malaysia, 1885-1980* (Singapore: Methodist Book Room, 1982).

³¹⁰ Article 3(1) of the Malaysian Constitution permits the practice of other religions as long as it is "in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation." However, because the Constitution defines Malays as a person who practices Islam, the act of propagation of non-Muslim religions among the Muslim population is tantamount to disturbing the peace and harmony of the country.

³¹¹ Along with the rapid economic transformation in the 1970s and 1980s, Malaysia also saw an increase of Islamic influence in the country. This encompassed almost every aspect of Malaysian life from dress codes to education policies to food laws to economic "ethics" to gender relations. While non-Malays are exempt from obeying Islamic law and codes of conduct, an undercurrent of Islamic fundamentalist thinking has become more vocal in challenging Malaysia's reputation as a moderate Muslim country. The influence of conservative religious teachers has also grown. The country's non-Muslim and non-Malay population are concerned that it is only a matter of time before these radical elements would infringe on their religious freedoms and subject the entire country under Islamic theocratic rule. There is a rich scholarly resource regarding this topic. See for example, Maria Louisa Seda-Poulin, "Islamization and Legal Reform in Malaysia: The Hudud Controversy of 1992," in *Southeast Asian Affairs* 20, no.1 (1993): 224-242; William Roff, "Patterns of Islamization in Malaysia, 1890s-1990s: Exemplars, Institutions, Vectors," in *Journal of Islamic Studies* 9, no.2 (1998): 210-228; Jecker Alf, "Islamisation in Malaysia and its Effects on Churches," in *Swedish Missiological Themes* 91, no.3 (2003): 429-462; William Roff, *Studies*

Examples of religious tensions include the 2009 church firebombings in Kuala Lumpur as a result of a judicial ruling that the word *Allah* was not an exclusive Muslim use alone.³¹² Previously, Malay-translations of Christian publications and periodicals were forbidden to use the word *Allah* to signify the Christian God since the National Islamic Council reasoned that it was exclusively used around the world to denote the Muslim God. Protestors of the ruling claimed that opening up the word for Christian use would only “confuse” the Malay-Muslim population.³¹³ The new ruling would effectively allow non-Muslims, especially Christians, to use the word in their Malay-translated Christian publications. In a separate incident a few months later, a group of Muslim Malays marched to the Selangor state government office with the severed head of a cow – a sacred animal for Hindus – to protest against the relocation of a Hindu temple to their predominantly Malay-Muslim neighborhood.³¹⁴

It is in these precarious scenarios that Metro Church is operating. As part of the Assemblies of God (AOG) denomination, Metro Church is a charismatic and Pentecostal church. Just to provide a visual of Metro Church, the church’s welcome brochure states that sing in tongues, prophesize and anoint people, and “fall when prayed for.” Located in

on Islam and Society in Southeast Asia (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009); Maznah Mohamad, “Making Majority, Undoing Family: Law, Religion and the Islamization of the State of Malaysia,” in *Economy and Society* 39, no.3 (2010): 360-384; and Jason Abbott, and Sophie Gregorios-Pippas, “Islamization in Malaysia: Process and Dynamics,” in *Contemporary Politics* 16, no.2 (2010): 135-151.

³¹² Baradan Kuppasamy, “Can Christians Say ‘Allah’? In Malaysia, Muslims Say No,” *Time*, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1952497,00.html#ixzz11cbDBbWI> (accessed July 3, 2011).

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Razak Ahmad, “Malaysian Muslim Protesters Charged with Sedition,” *Reuters*, February 9, 2009, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2009/09/09/idINIndia-42328720090909?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0> (accessed January 10, 2013).

the city of Subang Jaya, a well-to-do suburb in the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area, Metro Church is placed on the upper stories of a shop lot, amidst endless rows of terrace houses and bungalows. Unlike churches in the United States, there are no crosses or steeples that indicate that this is a house of worship. The sign for Metro Church is small enough that one can easily miss it if one is not paying attention. Metro Church is located on the third floor, and one has to climb a few flights of stairs to get there, although people with disabilities and senior citizens can use the elevator. Because Malaysian laws prohibit construction of churches from the ground, Christians have to purchase pre-existing buildings and convert them into religious institutions with government approval. Church groups are also not allowed to alter the basic shape of the building.

Metro Church's four-point vision statement states:

By the grace of God...

1. We envision a Pastoral Team with God-gifted five fold ministries, supported by a Leadership Community of 50 leaders.
2. We envision a Church with 300 committed disciples who are joyfully involved in their God-given ministries, participating in 30 CARE Groups, under the covering of a Shepherd Leader for every 10 members.
3. We envision a laity-empowered Church providing comprehensive ministries to meet the needs of every member, refreshing pastors and Christian workers, providing resources to enlarge their ministries.
4. We envision a Missions-focused Church that is involved in church planting, networking and financial partnership to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Malaysia and beyond.

The vision statement reflects Metro Church's distributed and horizontal leadership structure. It is precisely this horizontal leadership structure that we see how unequal belonging operates in the church. Because Metro Church does not operate on a "top-down" structure, unequal belonging demonstrates a more layered working of privilege and power that is inherent within the marginalized Chinese community in Malaysia. Metro Church's head pastor, Solomon Wu, is a product of the youth/student charismatic revival in Malaysia in the 1970s. A graduate of Bible College of Malaysia in 1984, Pastor Wu served as the young adult minister of a local Pentecostal (now defunct) church in Kuala Lumpur. When a scandal broke out in that church, he resigned from his post. Along with a few church members who left with him, Pastor Wu started Metro Church as an independent church in 1993. A year later, Metro Church was officially recognized in fellowship with the Assemblies of God of Malaysia.

Pastor Wu serves as the senior pastor of the Metro Church. Together with his pastoral staff, the church operates under the motto, "where God does marvelous things." The church has grown steadily since its inception. In 1999, the church raised enough funds to purchase and relocate to a larger space in a shop lot where it currently stands. The majority of the congregation resides in the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area; it is not surprising to find members traveling as far as Gombak and Ampang townships to attend Sunday worship. The congregation's demographics range from college-aged youths, to new families, to retired senior citizens. In recent years, Metro Church has renovated and expanded the size of its sanctuary to cater to its growing congregation. With this expansion, the church now possesses the necessary space to run several ministries and programs simultaneously. They also established a separate "Chinese Church" and

“Indonesian Church” for congregants who are not fluent in English in an adjacent unit. I shall return to address the significance of these churches (in particular the Chinese Church) later. For now, I turn toward my informants’ sites of negotiation – conversion and traditional Chinese observations. While these narratives reveal deep spiritual values for my participants, they also indicate the importance of adopting a western worldview and reaffirm their privileging and use of English in the process of conversion to Christianity as they negotiate their Chinese culture.

Chinese and Christian Sites of Negotiation

Conversion Stories and Entrance into Christianity

Conversion is a complex process, one that involves many variable aspects that influence an individual to switch from one religion to another. In this section, I demonstrate how conversion to Christianity at Metro Church is a gradual affair. More importantly, conversion plays an active role in reworking Chineseness and constructing a religious identity that is different from the “Chinese Chinese.” It is neither repudiation nor preservation of Chinese cultural traditions, but more about reorienting Chineseness through a shifting relationship with western worldviews.

I also highlight some of the predominant assumptions of conversion studies.³¹⁵

Many theories contend that personal crisis and tension forms the basis for religious

³¹⁵ See for example, Richard Travisano, “Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations,” in *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction*, edited by G.P. Stone, and H.A. Faberman (Waltham: Ginn-Blaisdell, 1970), 594-606; Max Heirich, “Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion,” in *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no.3 (1977): 653-680; Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Rodney Stark, and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

conversion. These theories are also deterministic which suggests that the convert is either consciously joining a religious group at will or passively “brainwashed” through manipulative techniques.³¹⁶

We must begin with William James’ classic text, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* because many subsequent scholars operate through his assumptions. James utilizes a psychological approach and argues that the urge to convert derives from feelings of incompleteness, depression, and sinfulness.³¹⁷ James distinguishes between two types of conversion: volitional conversion, which is gradual, and instantaneous conversion, which is sudden and dramatic. The clearest indicators of a person’s conversion, for James, are a sense of inner peace and control, reception of new perceived truths, an ecstasy of happiness, and sense of newness in life.³¹⁸ James’ model captures the trajectory of the convert who has changed and developed to a new person. However, his approach seems to apply only to people with extreme emotional problems, and he emphasizes instances of depression, tension, and instability. Therefore, there is a sense of

³¹⁶ See Guy Swanson, “Trance and Possession: Studies of Charismatic Influence,” in *Review of Religious Research* 19, no.3 (1978):253-278; Richard Ofshe, and Margaret Singer, “Attacks on Peripheral versus Central Elements of Self and the Impact of Thought Reforming Techniques,” in *Cultic Studies Journal* 3, no.1 (1986): 3-24; Phil Cushman, “The Besieged Self: Recruitment-Indoctrination Processes in Restrictive Groups,” in *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 16, no.1 (1986): 1-32; Robert J. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); and David Bromley, “A Tale of Two Narratives: Brainwashing and Conversion as Competing Political Narratives,” in *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, edited by Benjamin Zablocki, and Thomas Robbins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 318-348.

³¹⁷ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 164.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 195-204.

paternalism running through James' model where people with "sick souls" need only surrender to a higher power to remedy their personal inadequacies.³¹⁹

James' model continues to hold sway on future discourse on conversion as it continues to link conversion with emotional distress. In particular, John Lofland and Rodney Stark's model of conversion is based on a "sequential funnel," that is, a series of steps toward conversion.³²⁰ In "Becoming a World Saver," the authors interviewed converts from Reverend Moon's Unification Church in San Francisco and argue that people convert to a new religion during times of strain and hardship through a gradual process that is influenced by social relationships.³²¹ Total conversion, which includes behavioral and verbal commitments, involves seven "necessary and constellationally-sufficient conditions."³²² We also see James' influence on Lofland and Stark's theory since their approach presumes the existence of some kind of personal crisis which then leads to religious conversion. On the one hand, we must recognize the values and groundings for these theories. On the other hand, we must remain critical of what these assumptions mean about the converts.

Lofland and Stark's theory does lend a framework to Janet Lim's conversion narrative. I start with her story because it fits the most traditional idea of conversion looks like. Because of the extreme nature of her conversion story, she also exemplifies a dramatic reorientation of one's Chineseness around a Christian religious worldview.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 112.

³²⁰ John Lofland, and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," in *American Sociological Review* 30, no.6 (1965): 863.

³²¹ Ibid., 874.

³²² Ibid.

Although raised in a traditional Chinese environment, Janet's early exposure to Christianity came when she was in high school; she attended an Anglican missionary school. As an adult, she self-identified as a moralist. Even though her siblings converted to Catholicism as adults, she did not pay much attention to them because she felt that she was a good person and did not need to go to church. Meanwhile, her daughter started attending Metro Church and became good friends with some of the church elders. With all this exposure on Christianity, Janet claimed that she had the "double insurance" of knowing Christianity and Chinese religion. However, when her husband fell ill in 2004, she was at a loss. Although her daughter brought some Metro Church members to pray for her father, Janet recalled: "I really, really cried to God. I was on my knees, I was crying... and I said the Lord's Prayer... I told God. I said, 'God, if you heal him, I will be a Christian.' I didn't go to the temple... I didn't go do my joss sticks... I really turned to God... I was touched." Her husband did recover from his illness. While recovering in the hospital, Metro Church members continued visiting Janet and her husband. They offered them encouragement, gifts, and prayers. Janet was touched by their gesture of Christian love and started attending Metro Church. At church, she attended Bible study classes and started learning more about Christianity. Meanwhile, she was also learning about Catholicism which she felt was "a little off." After a period of evaluation, she decided that Metro Church was the place for her.

Certainly, the key point to Janet's conversion is the miraculous healing of her husband. This indicates how conversion can be gradual but punctuated by dramatic events. Janet's early exposure to Christianity introduced her to a Christian worldview as

presented by Metro Church. Her post-conversion Christian education reinforced and allowed her to reinterpret her ethnic identity within that Christian worldview.

While Janet's story shows the dramatic and crisis component of Lofland and Stark's theory, many of my participants have much less dramatic conversion stories and come from more stable lives. Many come from well-to-do middle class families and did not go through any traumatic events prior to conversion.

A more applicable model analyzing these less dramatic conversions would be Henri Gooren's "conversion career" approach. Henri Gooren's *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation* critiques older approaches for being too focused on crisis and tension as conditions for conversion. He also rejects the preconceived Pauline idea of a unique and once-in-a-lifetime conversion experience. Gooren asks whether religious conversion would orientate someone into a completely different personality or if there is congruence with the convert's experience of early religious upbringing. Gooren develops what he calls a "conversion career" approach. He rejects the idea of conversion as a straightforward progression where people have to go through stages in their conversion. Rather, a conversion career is "the member's passage... through various levels of religious participation."³²³ Gooren's approach captures a more accurate explanation of Metro Church members' conversion narratives.³²⁴

³²³ Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 48.

³²⁴ Gooren continues to carefully elaborate the various stages of conversion and disaffiliation according to his model. I will not go into greater detail here for the sake of brevity. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that he proposes a research agenda that includes an even distribution of informants across the life-cycle, greater attention to gender, and more attention to the relationship between leadership and religious competition. (*Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 135-136; 155)

For example, Nadine's conversion story demonstrates the dynamism of Gooren's conversion career model. A self-described curious religious seeker, Nadine converted to Christianity after a prolonged period of doubt, research, and education. Raised in a non-religious household, she is a natural inquirer and claims that she had always believed in the existence of God despite her upbringing. She identifies herself as a universalist prior to converting to Christianity. She believes that the existence of the different religions in the world is just God's ways to connect with different people. She recalled a childhood memory of her dog going missing. She prayed to God for its safe return. When the dog did return home, she claimed that this experience was her "first touch point in... belief." In college, she found great difficulty in accepting Christianity: "All these cultural things, you know?" she shrugged. Here, she is referring to her knowledge and respect for Chinese culture; a culture that she perceives is often at odds with Christianity.

After her graduation from college, Nadine started attending Metro Church at the urging of her friend. She started buying books and reading up on Christianity to try to understand the faith. The church elders also encouraged her to attend prayer meetings and Bible studies. But she declined because she wanted to learn about Christianity by herself. Her biggest problem was associating God with Jesus: "it took me so long... because [I thought] Jesus was... a [regular] person." Eventually, she accepted that Jesus is God through independent research and reading. She is glad that she gradually came to understand Christianity and became less inquisitive and less combative thanks to the family-like atmosphere of the church. Nevertheless, she continues to feel tension in her faith. She still has trouble accepting the fact that all non-Christians might end up in hell. In particular, her mother "has not seen the [Christian] light yet," but Nadine claims that

she is a good person and insists that she would “end up in a very good place” in the afterlife. She admits that it is difficult to reconcile the thousands of years of Chinese history and culture with Christianity. Tension is apparent through Nadine’s story: converting to Christianity requires giving up elements of her deeply intertwined ethnic and cultural identities, but with the possibility of gaining cultural capital through a Christian and a hybridized western worldview.

The *habitus* of Nadine’s Chinese upbringing does not mesh with a Christian worldview. Yet, *habitus* is not rigid since “the social world may be uttered and constructed in different ways, according to the different principles of vision and division.”³²⁵ For, within the *habitus*, Nadine could strategically maneuver around her social field to best transform her circumstances. This strategic maneuvering is about jockeying for position to acquire cultural capital.³²⁶

However, conversion is a highly subjective affair. Conversion narratives are also dependent on the reliability of the converts’ narratives. They may be lying or exaggerating their stories, building or simplifying them for narrative intelligibility. I am aware of the methodological issues surrounding the validity and accuracy of my informants. James Beckford argues that self-reported accounts of religious conversions

³²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, “Social Space and Symbolic Power,” in *Sociological Theory* 7, no.1 (1989): 19.

³²⁶ I am aware that I am potentially reducing Nadine’s complex experience of “searching for truth” to an instance of maximizing access to capital. How does one account for Nadine (and other informants’) experience of God beyond cultural capital? While I contend that analysis on Christian conversion can be carefully analyzed through a “scientific” lens, I also acknowledge that church members *do* experience a “non-rational” sense of the divine that cannot be easily explained through conventional scholarly means. Even though I want to take these two seemingly polar explanations seriously, nevertheless, I confess that this is one of the limitations of this project. Robert Orsi’s *Between Heaven and Earth* is an example of a scholar who takes the notion of divine presence seriously. See also Jeffrey Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

should not be taken at face value. Rather, they are “artfully accomplished constructions.”³²⁷ Beckford’s research on a Jehovah’s Witness community reveals that the community’s constructions of their conversion narratives cohere with the Watchtower movement’s official discourses. He contends that the converts internalize certain views of the Watchtower Society and that these views become resources for them to draw from in constructing their personal stories of religious conversion.³²⁸ It should be noted that these narratives are not merely parroting the religious organization’s “official script.” Rather, the script provides a basic structure to construct their conversion stories.³²⁹ While I acknowledge that biases and inaccuracies do exist in these narratives, I am also not interested in the accuracy of their stories. Rather, I am trying to analyze recurring patterns among the conversion narratives because these stories reveal how church members negotiate their Christian faith with Chinese culture.³³⁰

Zachary, who self-identified as a “curious seeker,” has been interested in religion since high school. Although he visited various churches when he was young, he felt that he was simply doing this “casually.” At the same time, he also dabbled in Taoist

³²⁷ James A. Beckford, “Accounting for Conversion,” in *British Journal of Sociology* 29, no.2 (1978): 250.

³²⁸ Ibid., 251.

³²⁹ For other examples on this topic, see Max Heirich, “A Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion,” in *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no.3 (1977): 653-680; Brian Taylor, “Recollection and Membership: Converts’ Talk and Ratiocination of Commonality,” in *Sociology* 12, no.2 (1978): 316-324; David Preston, “Becoming a Zen Practitioner,” in *Sociological Analysis* 42, (1981): 47-55; William Bankston, Craig Forsyth, and Hugh Floyd., “Toward a General Model of Radical Conversion: An Interactionist Perspective on the Transformation of Self-Identity,” in *Qualitative Sociology* 4, no.4 (1981): 279-297; and David A. Snow, *Shakubuku: A Study of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Movement in America, 1960-1975* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993).

³³⁰ For this reason, I utilize a wide spectrum of informants ranging from college-aged youths to the elderly. One complain on previous approaches to conversion is that the interviews tend to cluster around informants of the young adult age group. In addition, I supplement them with my field observations which lend credence to their stories.

practices. This is not surprising since he was also raised in an environment where joss sticks and ancestor worship were a part of his daily life. He told me, “I was looking for the truth; I want to find God.” When he was a teenager, a Christian revival rally (organized by American missionaries) passed by his hometown. After attending this meeting, he was convicted to embrace Christianity:

My classmates invited me to one of the rally. I remember that the rally is talking about the “Gospel train.” So I attend one of them. So I put up my hand to receive. That’s where it started.... There’s a prompting in my heart when the altar call was made. I put up my hand, there’s prompting in my heart. I hesitated... actually. In fact I fight it many times. But during that time, I think, I, with a prompting of my heart, and I, I would say that time... seeing that some truth that challenged me, you see... in the altar call, they always challenge us. So, I see that there’s some truth and some prompting in my heart. I want to take the challenge. I want to taste Jesus... It’s something very new.

I asked Zachary about his thoughts on his previous engagement with Taoism. He pointed out that what he did was very “cult-like.” What this means is not that Taoism is a cult, but rather it is the practices in Taoism that struck him as cultic. He explained by pointing to instances where he would consult mediums to win lottery tickets, and achieve good health. Despite these past dealings, Zachary insisted that he did not really “put heart into it.” Ultimately, it was Jesus’s “prompting of the heart” that led to his conversion to Christianity.

David Snow and Richard Machalek’s idea of biographical reconstruction is also helpful in explaining Zachary’s story. In “The Sociology of Conversion,” Snow and

Machalek's analysis of Nichiren Buddhists' conversion narratives suggests that "conversion accounts should not be taken as objective sources of data. Rather, these accounts act more as processes of biographical reconstructions that are constantly reinterpreted in the face of new experiences."³³¹ Conversion narratives become the lens to reconstruct previous life events.

Consider Mrs. Loring Gan's narrative. Although she had early exposure to Christianity through her Catholic high school experience, she only converted to Christianity in her 40s. She claimed that it was a "peaceful process." Growing up in a predominantly Buddhist and Taoist environment, she frequently visited the temple with her mother to participate in rituals and ceremonies, although she claimed that she did not understand anything that was going on. She recounted an instance where she was puzzled by a particular woman at the temple:

When I was young, my neighborhood was mostly Buddhist. And I saw this woman, she took a whole... bunch of joss sticks and just pray and pray, and then the minute she puts down [the joss sticks], she was scolding and scolding and scolding [other people]. I said, "is it really religion? Is this a good religion?" I asked myself, "is it a good religion?" You're scolding... you're supposed to religious; that means your heart must be good, but she's scolding... okay? That puts me off.

³³¹ David Snow, and Richard Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion," in *Annual Review of Sociology* 10, no.1 (1984): 177. The authors also question if conversion stories could change over time. To this end, they propose an analysis of conversion narratives in a way that would advance the understanding of the processes in which stories are (re)constructed; this includes the centrality of personal narratives as the means to analyze conversion, and the differences and similarities of conversion is constituted in different groups, whether they are religiously-based or not.

According to Loring, Christianity is a “very clean kind of religion.” I asked her for clarification to her assertion. She said that it was between the individual and God: “you go to church and you just pray to God.” Loring rejects Taoist and Buddhist traditions for their ritualism and unsophisticated enforcement of morality. Perhaps this is also the reason why she was “put off” by Chinese religious traditions. It was not until her sons became active in church that she and her husband started attending Metro Church. From this gradual experience, she “grew as a Christian.” She claimed that it became a “habitual” thing: “there are certain events and that we feel that it really give us some peace.” Zachary’s views on the cultic nature of Taoism and Loring’s rejection of the unsophisticated nature of Taoism are colored by a post-conversion reflection and restructuring of Chinese cultural and religious traditions. However, Loring and Zachary did not repudiate every aspect of traditional Chinese practices. Rather than a preservation of traditional Chinese culture, my informants demonstrated how Christianity helped them adapt and negotiate Chinese traditions.³³² They construct a hybridized identity, seeing their Chinese traditions through a Christian lens.

³³² There is a large body of literature that argues how Christianity functions as a vehicle to preserve an immigrant/minority community’s traditional cultures in a foreign environment. See, for example Philip Hammond, “Religion and the Persistence of Identity,” in *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 27, no.1 (1988): 1-11; Kelly Chong, “What it Means to be Christian: The Role of Religion in the Construction of Ethnic Identity and Boundary among Second-Generation Korean Americans,” in *Sociology of Religion* 39, no.3 (1998): 259-286; Min Zhou, and Carl Bankston III, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998); K.J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York’s Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Pyong Gap Min, “Immigrants’ Religion and Ethnicity: A Comparison of Korean Christian and Indian Hindu Immigrants,” in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, edited by Jane Iwamura, and P. Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2003), 125-148; and Pyong Gap Min, *Preserving Ethnicity Through Religion in America: Korean Protestants and Hindus across Generations* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

Chinese Traditions and Being Christian

Despite their commitment to the Christian faith, many of my informants told me about the importance of Chinese traditional celebrations such as Chinese New Year and *Qing Ming*. At the same time, they were flexible in their understanding of these customs. For example, mandarin oranges are a common mode of gift-giving among Metro Church members during Chinese New Year. The word for “mandarin orange” is *gam* in Cantonese, which also resembles the word “gold.” This gift symbolizes a wish for prosperity and wealth for the upcoming year. In addition, the meaning of the common Chinese New Year greeting of “*gung hei fatt choi*” has received a good deal of discussion among church members. Because the greeting means “congratulations and wishes for prosperity,” some church members were uncomfortable with its connotation because it refers to “earthly” material wealth. Instead, they preferred the alternative greeting “*san nihn fai lok*,” which literally means “happy new year” in Cantonese. Metro Church members are uncomfortable with the idea of luck because their lives are controlled by God and not fortune. The ideas of luck and fortune are present throughout Chinese New Year celebrations.³³³

The central tenets of Chinese New Year – prosperity and longevity – also become reconstructed to conform to Christian beliefs. Metro Church’s worship minister justified this through his interpretation of the biblical text. While the prosperity and longevity

³³³ For more information on the various traditions and religious observations surrounding Chinese New Year, see Cheu Hock Tong, ed., *Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia: Studies on the Chinese Religion in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1993); Patricia Bjaaland Welch, *Chinese New Year* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997); Yow Yit Seng, *Chinese Dimensions: Their Roots, Mindset, and Psyche* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 2006); and David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive, and Philip L. Wickeri, eds., *Chinese Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

certainly have commonalities in the Bible, the worship minister reasoned that the major difference between regular Chinese conceptions of prosperity and longevity and the Christian perspective is that the Christian concept is rooted in eternity and everlasting treasures. He implied that Chinese perspectives on prosperity and longevity are worldly and ephemeral.

Like Chinese New Year, *Qing Ming* (tomb sweeping day) is just as important for Metro Church members as it is for non-Christian Chinese. I spoke with those who travelled out of town to honor their ancestors' graves. They insisted that *Qing Ming* is not as much a festival for the dead as an obligation for the living. They claimed that there is a difference between worshipping, which is what non-Christian Chinese did, and honoring one's ancestors, which is the Christian way. Zachary equated *Qing Ming*, or "Remembrance Day" as he called it, with the Christian call to honor one's elders. As long as he did not pray with joss sticks on the graves of his ancestors, he was fine with it. He was quick to point out that he was not celebrating or performing rituals for the ancestors.³³⁴ Zachary preferred to call *Qing Ming* an act of honoring ancestors so that it would not be confused with worshipping or venerating ancestors, which is what the Chinese Chinese practice. Meanwhile, Jimmy Ning observed *Qing Ming* "to fulfill [his] responsibility for the living." Jimmy wanted to respect and fulfill the wishes of his aging parents by helping them carry food and worship materials to his grandparents' graves to

³³⁴ For more information on Chinese ancestral worship and its relationship with Christianity, see Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002); Lung-Kwong Lo, "The Nature of the Issue of Ancestral Worship among Chinese Christians," in *Studies in World Christianity* 9, no.1 (2003): 30-42; and Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003).

“lessen their burden,” since hiking up to the cemetery to the grave site was strenuous for his aging parents.

Metro Church members’ attempts to reconcile vastly different religious and cultural traditions are filled with conflicts and contradictions. More importantly, they are not dichotomous; even though there is a conscious effort to preserve their inherited Chinese cultural identity with their new-found religious identity, thought and action do not perfectly align with each other. Therefore, to explain these observations in terms of a recapitulation of colonial tendencies might not be accurate. Rather, we should see this as an example of an emergent expression of local identities and values. While it is true that Pentecostalism in Malaysia traces its beginnings from external forces like western missionaries, this cannot simply be understood as an extension of the westernization of Malaysian Chinese life, nor should we understand this to be a recapitulation of colonialism.

There are many challenges and difficulties to analyze Pentecostalism because there are many different types of Pentecostalism, each with different takes on theology, ritual, and organizing principles. Allan Anderson contends that there are no prescribed notions in defining Pentecostalism’s characteristics because scholars often overlook Pentecostalism’s growing complexities and its contribution to the local reinvention of Christianity.³³⁵ Paul Freston calls this reinvention a form of “local subversion,” a localized appropriation of Christianity that creates hybrid doctrines, practices, and

³³⁵ Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 14.

identities.³³⁶ Far from unsuspecting victims of imperialistic tendencies of Christianity, Metro Church members reaffirm their commitments as both Christian and Chinese; conversion to Christianity allows them to add another layer of meaning to their Chinese ethnicity.³³⁷

Conversion narratives and Chinese traditions point to a plurality of thinking and consciousness among Metro Church members. These pluralities involve constant negotiation and re-interpretation. Peter Berger refers these as the process of “alternation,” which he describes as “the possibility to choose between varying and sometimes contradictory systems of meanings.”³³⁸ Seen this way, conversion to Christianity is not a complete break with past traditions and/or identities. Instead, the “new” Christian identity provides the individual with interpretive rules to make sense of the world. This new system of meaning (i.e. conversion to Christianity) that the individual enters into should not be assumed as covering up the old system of meaning. Rather, it facilitates “an explanation of the meaning system he has abandoned” as well as combating their “doubts.”³³⁹ Thus, church members negotiate, delineate, and reinscribe Chinese cultural practices to accommodate their Christian faith.³⁴⁰

³³⁶ Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 286. See also Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003); and Joop Vernooij, “Religion in the Caribbean: Creation by Creolisation,” in *Global Christianity: Contested Claims*, edited by Frans Wijsen, and Robert Schreier (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 147-156.

³³⁷ Judith Nagata, “World Religions as a Source of Power,” in *Chinese Populations*, 172.

³³⁸ Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Experience* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), 54.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ I realize this observation relates to the idea of syncretism and hybridity. I will explore these concepts more fully in the next chapter as it relates to my idea of unequal belonging.

Once again, Bourdieu helps explain this phenomenon. This relation between the social structure and *habitus* is important in explaining how church members are constrained by the shape of the existing field. The cultural patterns that are based on historically complex socio-economic adaptations by which Metro Church members understand their lives may not always be conscious in their minds even though these patterns exert considerable amount of influence in structuring their lives. *Habitus* overcomes the objective/subjective dichotomy by considering individual acts as “intentionless inventions of regulated improvisation” produced by the dynamic relationship between individuals and structures within a field.³⁴¹ As Bourdieu asserts, “[agents] can succeed only to the extent that ... they manage to reactivate dispositions which previous processes of inculcation have deposited in people’s bodies.”³⁴²

The process of socialization endows church members with certain knowledge and knowhows in the field of cultural production. In this case, Metro Church becomes a field where cultural capital is invested and generated. Religious conversion and the subsequent reshaping of Chinese cultural traditions may be regarded as a strategic position-taking. Conversion to Christianity helps church members maintain or improve their position in the field of cultural production. The individuals acting in this field develop a particular set of dispositions in the struggle to gain access to capital. Cultural capital, in the form of English language and Christian morals, translates into status and prestige.

³⁴¹ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 57.

³⁴² Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 235.

Establishing the Economic Status of Metro Church

A majority of Metro Church members come from well-to-do families and are already economically privileged. Although some work in blue collar jobs such as construction, they nevertheless belong in the management level, working as supervisors and managers. Yet, the wealth of Metro Church members is difficult to discern. They may not dress the part, but they often have wealth tucked away for their children's education, a new house, or expensive trips overseas. Flaunting their wealth is not part of their *modus operandi*.

One way to determine the congregation's wealth is by examining the weekly contributions of the church. While the actual weekly church contributions are anonymous, monthly and annual contributions are listed on the church bulletin board. This board gives a report of the church's financial resources, and the average monthly and yearly church giving. The numbers are staggeringly high, amounting to tens of thousands of dollars. This is an indication of the wealth of the congregation, and church members do not hesitate to give their money for the betterment of the church and kingdom of God. Pastor Wu often encourages his flock to contribute generously to the betterment of God's Kingdom, and the congregation responds in kind.

I also asked my informants if they could describe their wealth and economic status within Malaysian society. They usually added qualifiers to justify their answers. For example, Jeremy claimed that he was part of the "working class" before he started his own business. Now he calls himself "lower middle" class, although "not struggling as much as before." Jimmy, on the other hand, described himself as "average" and "nothing fancy." Nevertheless, the typical answer that I received was, "I'm comfortable," which

indicates that they are economically well off. In many instances, church members talked about their “absent” children from church who were off attending college in the United States, Australia or England.

Since church members are economically privileged and possess economic capital, the church does not play as much a part in helping members acquire economic capital. Yet, capital does not exist solely in terms of monetary wealth, but in status, cultural knowledge, and social connections. Thus, Metro Church functions as a site for acquiring another form of capital – cultural capital.

Christianity as Cultural Capital

Becoming Part of an English-speaking Community

Even though Fenggang Yang argues that Chinese Christians often link Christianity with the economic success of the West, achieving upward mobility goes beyond monetary wealth.³⁴³ There are other forms of capital manifested through Christianity. For Metro Church members, more than simply accumulating economic capital, conversion to Christianity affords them access to cultural capital. Christianity becomes a site for the acquisition of cultural capital. Its teachings purport to help people to become morally superior if they live out their Christian values. These values translate as knowledge of western lifestyles and privilege English as the language of choice.

My informants’ preference in attending the English church is not so much a matter of choice, but a product of socialization in a middle-class, urban, and western

³⁴³ Fenggang Yang, “Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Christianity: The Importance of Social and Cultural Contexts,” in *Sociology of Religion* 59, no.3 (1998): 251.

upbringing. This is especially true in Malaysia where English remains a foreign language in rural areas while it is very much an everyday language in larger urban areas.³⁴⁴ English is an influential means of communication in foreign trade, in business, and in politics in non-English speaking countries.³⁴⁵ One's mastery of English also plays an important role in conferring social and economic advantages. Rakesh Bhatt argues that English is the "commercial lingua franca" in international business.³⁴⁶ As a result, formerly colonized communities consider English "the linguistic capital necessary for the accumulation of both economic and political powers."³⁴⁷ For Malaysian Chinese who are fluent in English, this translates to entrance into English-speaking colleges overseas, employment in well-paying multi-national corporate jobs, and recognition of status. English is a form of cultural capital that confers to people a prestige and honor that could be converted into more economic wealth.

Some scholars stress that the privileging of English as a mode of communication is a form of linguistic colonialism.³⁴⁸ These are extremely important critiques. For example, Robert Phillipson defines linguistic imperialism as "the dominance of

³⁴⁴ Phillip Benson, "A Language in Decline?" in *English Today* 6, no.4 (1990): 20.

³⁴⁵ See Steven J. Ross, "Language Testing in Asia: Evolution, Innovation, and Policy Challenges," in *Language Testing* 25, no.1 (2008): 5-13; and Angeles Clemente, and Michael J. Higgins, "Whose English is it Anyway? Culture, Language and Identity: Ethnographic Portraits from Oaxaca, Mexico," in *Working Papers on Culture, Education and Human Development* 1, no.3 (2005): 1-33.

³⁴⁶ Rakesh Bhatt, "World Englishes," in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30, no.2 (2001): 532.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 533.

³⁴⁸ See for example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986); Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Alistair Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Donaldo Macedo, Bessie Dendrinos, and Panayota Gounari, *The Hegemony of English* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2003); and Vaughan Rapatahana, and Pauline Bunce, eds., *English Language as Hydra: Its Impact on non-English Language Cultures* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012).

English... asserted and maintained by the establishment of continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.”³⁴⁹ However, Phillipson’s idea of linguistic imperialism, or “anglocentricity,” reduces people as helpless victims of structural imposition. Philipson’s position also assumes that colonized peoples are incapable of independent decision-making. While I do not fully agree with the idea of a fully agential person either, fluency and mastery of English among Chinese Malaysians is a strategic maneuvering in a Bourdieuan sense. Metro Church members are not deluded nor are they fully conscious agents of change either. In an environment that has politically and ethnically marginalized the Chinese community, they master English because it grants them access to cultural and economic capital.³⁵⁰ As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, forms of capital are not fully distinct categories, but are often intertwined.

There is a transnational quality in Metro Church’s typical Sunday worship service that is transferable from one context to another. If an English-speaking visitor from the United States happened to stumble into the church’s Sunday service, he or she would be able to follow most of the service without much knowledge of Malaysian Chinese culture; the church’s medium of communication is English and follows a typical evangelical pattern: welcome and announcements, prayer, praise and worship, communion, sermon, and dismissal. Songs are sung in English and are usually selected from American Christian publications such as the Vineyard. Sermons are also in English

³⁴⁹ Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*, 47.

³⁵⁰ For critiques on linguistic imperialism, see Joseph Bisong, “Language Choice and Cultural Imperialism: A Nigerian Perspective,” in *ELT Journal* 49, no.2 (1995): 122-132; Alan Davies, “Ironising the Myth of Linguicism: Review Article,” in *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 17, no.6 (1996): 485-496; and Marnie Holborow, *Politics of English* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999).

(with a sprinkling of Cantonese), and “Manglish,” a type of localized English dialect.

Sometimes, Pastor Wu invites other church leaders, or preachers and ministers from other AOG affiliated churches and ministries to deliver guest sermons. On many occasions, the church invited guest speakers from Australia, New Zealand and other English-speaking countries. The sermon contents usually revolve around themes of personal piety, the end times, faith in God’s provisions, and the power of God’s healing.

It is not just that church services and sermons are conducted in English, the feel of the church is that of a western, modernized church. The sanctuary is set up like a typical evangelical church in the United States. Western instruments such as electric guitars, drum kits, and synthesizers fill up the stage. Worship is also largely computerized. The sanctuary boasts a state of the art sound box and mixer board; PowerPoint presentations project song lyrics, biblical verses, and sermon notes onto a large screen behind the pulpit. The technology present in the sanctuary also indicates a level of wealth and success.

The majority of church members have college degrees and successful careers. This is most visible among young families, who strive to provide their children with a good education. For example, Pastor Wu himself recently graduated with a Doctorate of Ministry at a divinity school in the United States. My informants, especially the younger members, have degrees from foreign English-speaking colleges; Emily Chang went to the United States to study psychology, and had recently completed her Masters degree in Counseling at a local English-speaking college. Meanwhile, Rosie Hung earned her Hotel and Management degree from a college in Rhode Island. These academic qualifications obtained from English-speaking countries mean that Metro Church members are already

highly fluent in English. In this way, attending an English-speaking church is not so much about practicing English but being part of an English-speaking Chinese community. The real advantage here is the status of being around English-speaking Chinese. More than just an “English club,” Metro Church is a religious community in which Christian values and morals are propagated. From these teachings, they gain access to western values which translates into cultural capital.

Propagating Christian/Western Values

In addition to English, church members learn western and Christian values in church. A majority of Metro Church members subscribe to American evangelical ministry programs such as Focus on the Family to learn more about Christian family living. The church’s library also has a modest collection of books acquired through donations, mostly in English. There are books authored by famous evangelical and Pentecostal preachers from the West such as James Dobson, Billy Graham, Chuck Colson, and Rick Warren. These materials are available for Metro Church members to read and research more on various issues ranging from traditional Christian family values to personal piety. These traditional Christian values translate as knowledge to navigate the world as Christians.

Yet, these values also reinforce patriarchal structures where church members accept as the ideal form of Christian relationship. Why would Chinese women adopt identities that are predicated on their loss of power and reinforcement of their own oppression? Feminist scholars assert that women who choose to associate with these constructions of identity may in fact be empowered even as they appear to be

disempowered.³⁵¹ For example, R. Marie Griffith's study on Pentecostal women seeks to reexamine how the women reshape the concept of submission to suit their own devices. In *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, Griffith's ethnographic study reveals that submission is subverted into empowerment by way of harmonizing submission as God's will.³⁵² She also discovers this to be instances of the "lampooning of male behavior."³⁵³

Frances Adeney's *Christian Women in Indonesia: A Narrative Study of Gender of Religion* echoes Griffith's analysis by demonstrating how Indonesian Christian women gain access to power in a male-dominated society. Adeney utilizes vignettes from her research participants and argues that the women use everyday practices such as offering

³⁵¹ To be sure, this issue goes beyond the confines of church and Christianity. In particular, the issue of the veil among Muslim women becomes a prime example of women empowering themselves in a marginalized situation. For example, Lila Abu-Lughod's *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) argues that the traditional conceptions of modesty, honor, and shame need to be reconsidered from the perspective of the Bedouin women themselves. For more examples of instances of empowerment in the Muslim context, see for example, Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1999); Anindita Ghosh, *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). For other examples of resistance and empowerment among women and marginalized peoples, see Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-way Place* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Devika Chawla, "I Will Speak Out: Narratives of Resistance in Contemporary Indian Women's Discourses in Hindu Arranged Marriages," in *Women and Language* 30, no.1 (2007): 5-19.

³⁵² R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 147. For more information on women's conversion to conservative Christianity and its empowerment within a seemingly patriarchal institution, see also Brenda Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Amali Philips, "Stridhanam: Rethinking Dowry, Inheritance and Women's Resistance among Syrian Christians of Kerala," in *Anthropologica* 45, no.2 (2003): 245-263.

³⁵³ Griffith, *God's Daughters*, 155. The appeal towards mysticism also provides a powerful impetus for empowerment and resistance. Since Metro Church encourages speaking in tongues, this functions as direct accessibility to God which in turn can challenge patriarchal forms of religious authority. See Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Also see David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics and the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1994). In particular, Tracy argues that Christian theologians must pay attention to the voices of the margins, many of which are mystical and prophetic. As such, Tracy creates an important link between acts of resistance and mysticism and prophecy.

hospitality, and honoring relationships to develop “resistance theologies that reconstruct social realities.”³⁵⁴ Adeney’s analysis shows the highly contextualized nature of resistance and gender equality. As such, there is no “one size fits all” approach to analyzing empowerment and resistance.³⁵⁵ In my context, the importance of filial piety, as part of the inherited cultural givens of Chineseness, favors males over females. The *habitus* of Metro Church members blends easily with the conservative Christian message of men being heads of households. Because of Chinese filial piety’s resemblance with Christian patriarchy, it is difficult for the women to challenge and maneuver around these structures. While I am certain that women members of Metro Church are not victims of patriarchal structures, I am also not sure if they are actively challenging these structures.

In addition, the church’s weekly sermons reinforce traditional Christian values in accordance to western biblical interpretations. One sermon by a guest preacher – a self-declared Chinese Malaysian “evangelist” – alluded to the Prayer of Jabez as a way of increasing one’s wealth and health. The evangelist also assured the congregation about the “power of giving.” This giving by means of increase in wealth is not for personal gain but for the betterment of God’s kingdom. The sermon implied a trickle down blessing where the fortunate (the blessed) are to help out – in a sense, to be a blessing – to less fortunate people. This particular sermon reinforced values of humility and generosity – values that many church members did not associate with the Chinese Chinese. As I explained in the previous chapter, my informants identified the Chinese Chinese as greedy and selfish people. As non-Christians, they lack the moral compass to live ethical

³⁵⁴ Frances Adeney, *Christian Women in Indonesia: A Narrative Study of Gender and Religion* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 179.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

lives. Thus, the Christian values inculcated through sermons are taken as superior to non-Christian Chinese values. In the face of an amoral drive for individual wealth, these teachings enhance Metro Church members with Christian justification and moral regulations for their economic wealth and behavior.³⁵⁶

Some sermons even respond to particular western holidays/observances. During the weekend of Mother's Day, Pastor Wu's wife delivered a sermon addressing the importance of motherhood. She spoke about the importance of mothers raising children to be obedient to God. At one point during the sermon, she alluded to Amy Chua's concept of the "Tiger Mother," a concept that she rejected because "as a Chinese trait," Asian parenting techniques were too stringent.³⁵⁷ It is not that she was rejecting the traditional Chinese way of motherhood, but she stated that it needed a Christian balance to it. The Christian way she advocated had to do with balance and honor. This sermon teaches Metro Church members how Christianity can perfect their Chinese ways of living.

The church becomes a site of cultural competency not just through its sermons, but through a myriad of ministry programs such as cell groups (called CARE groups),

³⁵⁶ Xiaoying Wang points out that in China, the post-Mao government had encouraged individual accumulation of wealth that heralded a type of mentality that is obsessed with getting rich without any moral compass to guide or regulate these practices. Although Wang is pointing to the context of China, it is not difficult to imagine how these viewpoints would have the same effect among Metro Church members since many of them lamented that the Chinese were "greedy" and too "money-minded." See Xiaoying Wang, "The Post-Communist Personality: The Spectre of China's Capitalist Market Reforms," in *The China Journal* 47 (2002):1-17. See also Barak Kalir, "Finding Jesus in the Holy Land and Taking Him to China: Temporary Migrant Workers in Israel Converting to Evangelical Christianity," in *Sociology of Religion* 70, no.2 (2009): 130-156.

³⁵⁷ Amy Chua's controversial book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* describes her efforts to raise her children in what she describes as a traditional and strict Chinese upbringing. She juxtaposes the traditional Chinese method of parenting with a lax western kind. Ultimately, she believes that the Chinese way is superior to the western way because Chinese children end up excelling better than western children. See Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

and School of Christian Growth (SCG) classes. SCGs are Bible/book study classes designed to teach members about Christianity and the Christian life. Depending on one's level of "spiritual maturity," lessons range from strengthening the faith of young believers, to lessons in apologetics, as well as the end times. Attendance is voluntary but members are highly encouraged to attend. During my fieldwork, I regularly sat in on one of the classes to gain exposure to the course content and the exchanges between the students. This particular class was designed specifically for "intermediate believers." They were studying a guided workbook called "Walking with Christ." In these classes, members follow a lesson curriculum set up by the church leadership. Members are taught to submit to God's will and live with a "servant's heart" as an ongoing transformation of one's Christian life. SCG classes build a theological base that CARE groups translate into daily practices.

Basically a cell group, CARE (Caring, Accepting, Reaching, Encouraging) groups are smaller and more intimate than SCG classes. The church leadership believes that small groups are an important aspect in nurturing the Christian's spiritual growth by caring for each other in practical ways. These groups meet every Friday night in the CARE group leader's home to fellowship with one another, share testimonies, answer prayer requests, and conduct Bible lessons. Group members are provided with a study workbook based on a particular book in the Bible. In CARE groups, a small group of congregants meet to affirm and support each other in their faith. Janet Lim finds CARE groups to be important because she has the opportunity to interact with other Christians and "help each other [and] advise each other to grow as a Christian." Prayer requests and testimonial sharing time reveal what members' concerns are and what they value. On one

occasion, an older gentleman shared his success in purchasing several properties. He attributed this as a sign of God's blessings and the outcome of his faith. Book lessons from the CARE group only serve to reinforce these values.

At the time I was conducting my observations, CARE group participants were studying the book of Proverbs with focus on becoming a wise and prudent Christian. These studies were personal and practical as group members learn how these biblical principles could be applied to their daily lives. One lesson discussed how to differentiate between "a prudent and simple person." Whereas the prudent person is able to detect any deceit or dishonesty, the simple person is foolish and is susceptible to manipulation and temptation. Group members would then use this knowledge to apply it to their daily lives. Another older gentleman in the group shared how God helped him become wiser in his business decision making process and did not become a victim of unscrupulous business practices. All this translates into cultural capital – tacit knowledge required to succeed in everyday life such as conducting and making wise business decisions.

Finally, Metro Church teaches its congregants the value of temperance and moderation. Church leaders are not forbidden from consuming alcohol. Although regular church attendees are allowed to consume alcohol in moderation, they are dissuaded from doing so; many church members also choose not to drink alcohol by their own volition. Throughout the duration of my fieldwork, I also did not see anyone smoke tobacco at church or at any non-church related gatherings. On many occasions, my participants told me that they stopped smoking and drinking after they converted to Christianity. Moreover, they often point towards the non-Christian Chinese as practicing these vices. The implication here is that smoking and drinking, as identity markers, are considered to

be activities of culturally “lower” people. Korey Nah recalls his experience after his conversion to Christianity. He felt “uncomfortable” when his non-Christian relatives started playing mahjong and drinking whiskey during Chinese New Year celebrations. Like Korey, church members reasoned that these actions may cause other Christians to “stumble” in their faith. Church members interpret these vices as indicative of flawed morality dishonoring of one’s body as “the temple of the Lord.”

The examples above show how conversion to Christianity and the construction of hybridized Chinese Christian identity provides Metro Church members with access to mastery of English and a westernized worldview. Members gain access to this cultural capital which provides them with the means to navigate an environment that marginalizes them for their ethnicity and religion.

Unequal and Limited Capital

In the previous section, I showed how conversion to Christianity facilitates access to cultural capital. While this empowers Metro Church members with forms of western ideals and mastery of English, we should not see this empowerment as a type of Chinese resistance against dominant-Malays in Malaysia. Given my analysis of the process of conversion and participation in Christianity, it is tempting to assume that cultural capital is freely available for all. As I have mentioned earlier, accumulation of capital among church members is more about what Dahles argues as creating openings to maximize one’s access to capital. While Dahles affirms how conversion to Christianity offers Malaysian Chinese, in particular the Chinese business elites, access to various types of

capital,³⁵⁸ I also argue that access to capital is not freely available for all. It is limited and unequal, because only English-speaking and westernized Chinese are able to access this cultural capital. One's mastery of English or appreciation for western ideals is not contingent on skill or intellect. Rather, church members have a preexisting head start over others by virtue of the *habitus* that provides them access to power and privilege despite their status as a minority group in Malaysia. Christianity enhances access to these resources. *Habitus* enables the social actor to "know" the world without thinking about it, react to different cultural stimuli properly, and make judgments on what is considered vulgar, distinguished, acceptable, or unacceptable.

For Bourdieu, economics alone will not help explain the reproduction of social inequality. Rather, he is interested in developing "a general science of the economy of practices that does not artificially limit itself to those practices that are socially recognized as economic... to grasp capital, that 'energy of social physics,' in all of its different forms, and to uncover the laws that regulate their conversion from one into another."³⁵⁹ In particular, Bourdieu explores the ways in which the trappings of middle class and urban culture are deployed as "raw materials" in the dynamics of class relations. Cultural capital plays a central role in societal power relations as it produces a non-economic form of domination. In this section, I show how the unequal distribution of cultural capital perpetuates an intra-ethnic oppression among the Chinese. In particular,

³⁵⁸ Dahles, "In Pursuit of Capital," 105.

³⁵⁹ Bourdieu, and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 118.

limited access to cultural capital creates unequal belonging between Modern Chinese and Chinese Chinese.³⁶⁰

Power exercised through cultural capital should not be misconstrued as setting a political agenda. Bourdieu believes cultural capital imposes its power through exclusion and symbolic imposition. It is the power of legitimating how specific cultural norms and practices are deemed superior and how they are institutionalized to regulate behavior and access to resources.³⁶¹ As much as cultural capital can bestow advantages upon the individual, it could also be used to exclude others, perpetuate conformity, and as such, recapitulate essentialist categories. The flexibility and fluidity of cultural capital is that it functions both ways, that is, it can be used in positive as well as negative ways.

In Metro Church, the cultural capital of Christianity is limited. The existence of two sister churches, the “Chinese Church” and the “Indonesian Church,” offers a hint to the limited and ambiguous characteristics of this cultural capital.³⁶² The Chinese Church

³⁶⁰ See Michele Lamont, and Marcel Fournier, eds., *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁶¹ Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education: Society and Culture* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977), 18. Although Bourdieu and Passeron focus their analysis on the education system, many scholars use their model to analyze social inequalities in other areas such as social work, the health care system, and international relations. See, for example Jan Pakulski, *Globalising Inequalities: New Patterns of Social Privilege and Disadvantage* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2004); Mustafa Emirbayer, and Eva Williams, “Bourdieu and Social Work,” in *Social Service Review* 79, no.4 (2005): 689-724; Gerry Veenstra, “Social Space, Social Class and Bourdieu: Health Inequalities in British Columbia, Canada,” in *Health and Place* 13, no.1 (2007): 14-31; and Terry Lovell, *(Mis)recognition, Social Inequality and Social Justice: Nancy Fraser and Pierre Bourdieu* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

³⁶² Even though the Chinese and Indonesian churches exist under the same banner of Metro Church, the two congregations are separated from the English-speaking church. I was told that Metro Church started the Indonesian Church as an extension of their ministry to evangelize church members’ servants and maids from Indonesia. In addition, the Chinese and Indonesian churches, especially the Chinese Church is most unequal within the context of Metro Church. Even though they have converted to Christianity, they lack knowledge of modernity and mastery of English. I regret that I was unable to visit both sister churches during my fieldwork. I am certain that future field research on these two congregations would further prove my argument that unequal belonging is a more useful category of analysis compared to

is Metro Church's ministry extension to cater to friends and families of the regular English church attendees who are not fluent in English. On the surface, these churches do not appear dissimilar from each other except by their mode of communication. The Chinese Church has its own staff and worship band. This particular congregation is not integrated with the English-speaking congregation. Instead, the English and Chinese churches only come together during special services such as baptisms. While it is not uncommon to find churches communicating in English and Chinese together in a single setting in Malaysia, Metro Church chooses to remain separate. Thomas Gan insisted that Metro Church needed to conduct its worship services according to its own "segment." What he means by this is the two groups should not integrate as a unified congregation. Thomas argued that "our mind will run away...we cannot focus." He explained that the congregations should not mix because the constant back and forth translation between English and Chinese would only distract the overall flow and impact of the worship service.

However, there are rare instances when these two churches come together. Metro Church conducts special baptism services at the culmination of the new member classes. Because Metro Church is a relatively small building, the church conducts its baptisms in a different and larger church with a pool. I attended one of these services during my fieldwork. In that particular service, there were at least two dozen new members. It was also a combined service where the English and Chinese Churches were in attendance simultaneously. Staff members from the Chinese and English Churches led the service.

hybridity. Indeed, hybridity could not account for the complex workings power and privilege that is enmeshed within marginalized groups.

Although it was a bilingual service where English and Mandarin were spoken, they were not translated for the congregants.³⁶³

At this particular service, most of the baptism candidates came from the Chinese Church. One by one, the candidates walked up to the pool to be received and baptized by the pastors of their respective congregations. After the service, I asked the worship leader of the Chinese Church why she did not pray in Chinese. My question appeared to have caught her by surprise. She said that she did not know how to answer that question and in hindsight, she should have said the prayer in Chinese. Even though the majority of the baptism candidates were from the Chinese Church, this exchange suggests an unequal belonging between the Chinese and English congregations. Although the churches exist under the banner of Metro Church, there is an unconscious privileging of English as the preferred medium of communication even though she is a member of the Chinese Church. The fact that it was a leader from the Chinese Church that said this proves that non-English speaking, or at least non-English fluent church members do not occupy equal playing field compared to English-speaking modernized Chinese Christians.

I also asked my participants what they thought about the Chinese Church. For the most part, the responses were lukewarm. The responses displayed ignorance to the Chinese Church's activities. Many expressed that they did not know much about the

³⁶³ For information on multilingual practices and its function in promoting solidarity and inclusion, see Monica Heller, *Paths to Post-Nationalism: A Critical Ethnography of Language and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Julie Byrd Clark, *Multilingualism, Citizenship, and Identity: Voices of Youth and Symbolic Investments in an Urban, Globalized World* (London: Continuum, 2009); Emi Otsuji, and Alastair Pennycook, "Metrolingualism: Fixity, Fluidity and Language in Flux," in *International Journal of Multilingualism* 7, no.3 (2010): 240-254; Tope Omoniyi, ed., *The Sociology of Language and Religion: Change, Conflict, and Accommodation* (New York: Basingstoke, 2010); Huamei Han, "Social Inclusion through Multilingual Ideologies, Policies, and Practices: A Case Study of a Minority Church," in *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 14, no.4 (2011): 383-398; and Ambarin Mooznah Auleear Owodally, "Multilingual Language and Literacy Practices and Social Identities in Sunni Madrassahs in Mauritius: A Case Study," in *Reading Research Quarterly* 46, no.2 (2011): 134-155.

church or its congregants. Mostly, they claimed unfamiliarity with Mandarin as a reason for their ignorance. Others such as Tiffany Feng said that that she could “express [herself] better in English rather than Cantonese or Mandarin.” Finally, another member argued that she “never felt comfortable” in the Chinese Church: “It’s like I couldn’t express myself through songs...The songs don’t appeal to me.” She claimed that something is lost when English Christian songs are translated into Chinese; they lack a certain quality that elicits one’s connection to God.

While one cannot fault many church members for not attending the Chinese Church due to their inability to speak Chinese, others, such as Janet, are fluent in Chinese. Yet, she chooses not to attend the Chinese Church because she claimed that the English service is better because of her “retention” rate. This implied that an English-speaking church service is more conducive in the overall understanding of Christianity. Janet prefers to attend the English service because she feels that she could learn more about Christianity in English, even though I suspect that the Chinese Church is just as adequate in teaching its congregation about Christianity. Meanwhile, Justin Chang did not “really think too much about it.” He cited, as did other church members, the music as the impetus for attending the English service. “I don’t listen to Chinese songs. I find it very ‘emo.’” Even though he understands Mandarin, he did not understand the verses of the songs: “I’m being brought up in an English environment where I speak English.” These responses indicate that the English-speaking Chinese members of Metro Church prefer not to attend the Chinese Church. As Modern Chinese, Metro Church members live in urban areas, are inculcated with modernity, and are fluent in English. Thus, the *habitus* unconsciously socializes them to attend the English Church.

The acquisition of cultural capital through Christianity goes hand in hand with a devaluation of other cultural competences and resources that church members find lacking. Their westernized outlook becomes the norm in evaluating other Chinese groups, especially the Chinese Chinese. For Metro Church members, their identification as Modern Chinese, now reflected through their Christian faith, informs them that the Chinese Chinese are somehow morally and culturally lacking. Thus, this cultural capital is unequal because the Chinese Chinese are prevented from accessing it.

If Metro Church members view themselves as open, progressive, and modern, they view the Chinese Chinese as their opposites. For example, Jimmy Ning said that the Chinese Chinese are mostly “sly, con-men.” He claimed that there are many Chinese who are cutting corners and “just want to find an easy way out.” Jimmy’s statement is informed by his acquired cultural capital as an honest and productive Christian. Jeremy Lee faulted the Chinese Chinese who are educated in the “traditional Chinese ways.” He argued that these traditional ways consist of educational skills that do not promote progressive thinking. Instead, these skills involve mundane and rote memorization of facts. As such, Jeremy reasoned that the Chinese Chinese are not as progressive as the West. Zachary echoes Jeremy’s sentiment and equated Chinese culture as “selfish” by virtue of their upbringing:

You see... if you know the culture of the Chinese, they’re very selfish. The knowledge they have, they keep it to themselves. Okay? Whereas the West, you look at the West... whatever knowledge and discovery they have, they will discuss. They share. That’s why they progress much faster. So, that’s why we

know so much about the western world, because of their openness and sharing of knowledge.

Zachary's use of the word "progress" reflects a view of the Chinese Chinese as lagging behind the West. Moreover, he is recapitulating the ruling BN-government's trope of the the untrustworthy and shrewd money-grubbing Chinese. These statements are particularly disturbing and revealing at the same time. Although Metro Church members are ethnically Chinese, they create distinctions between them and other non-Christian and non-westernized Chinese Malaysians. Coupled with the limited access to cultural capital there is unequal belonging in Metro Church members' hybridized identities.

While the examples above appear to focus on the negative aspects of traditional Chinese education and business practices, other critiques are centered on traditional Chinese Chinese traits and values. For example, Jimmy has strong reservations toward Chinese Chinese families favoring boys over girls. He called these practices "outdated" and "old-fashioned" and wondered why Chinese families are still obsessed over the role of men as heirs to the family. Finally, Mrs. Loring Gan calls the Chinese Chinese "superstitious" people who are governed by numbers and the forces of nature. They are also cold, calculating, and "noisy" people. Here, the word "noisy" is associated with one's lack of personal and cultural etiquette. Without the morally superior life that Christianity bestows on Loring, she finds that Chinese Chinese behaviors and mannerisms lack polish.

Unequal cultural capital is operating at an unconscious level. It is not that church members are *actively* oppressing the Chinese Chinese. It is also not my intention to pit these two Chinese groups against each other. Nor am I conceptualizing these two groups

as dichotomously separated. Rather, Metro Church members have internalized their ways of living as the norm. To this end, church members are committing what Bourdieu calls “symbolic violence” – the unnoticed and partly unconscious domination that everyday social habits maintain over the conscious subject – against non-Christian Chinese.³⁶⁴ Thus, acquisition of cultural capital that is supposed to empower the Chinese minority in Malaysia ends up reinforcing the negative and essentializing stereotypes associated with Chinese Malaysians toward the Chinese Chinese. Thus, Metro Church members are engaged in unequal belonging.

Conclusion

Among the various types of Christianity present today, Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity are enjoying a surge in growth especially in the Global South. Some Pentecostal churches have become rich and prospered from wealthier congregations. In Malaysia, the emergence of Pentecostal Christianity and its ministry among the Chinese is divided along language and dialect lines, resulting in the emergence of Chinese-speaking churches and English-speaking churches. It is the English-speaking congregation that presents an enticing and attractive option that is modern and western.

Conversion to Christianity is usually associated with a recapitulation of the colonial mindset. However, I conceptualize Christianity not as a tool of colonization or

³⁶⁴ For more information on this concept, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond, and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). As with many of Bourdieu’s concepts, many scholars have utilized symbolic violence in their works. See for example, Gabrielle Lakomski, “On Agency and Structure: Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron’s Theory of Symbolic Violence,” in *Curriculum Inquiry* 14, no.2 (1984): 151-163; Keith Topper, “Not so Trifling Nuances: Pierre Bourdieu, Symbolic Violence, and the Perversions of Democracy,” in *Constellations* 8, no.1 (2001): 30-56; and John Myles, *Bourdieu, Language and the Media* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

an instrument of liberation, but a vehicle for socializing members into adopting certain orientations and practices in relation to their surroundings. In terms of conversion, the traditional view holds personal crisis and hardship as the impetus for conversion – sudden, dramatic, and once in a lifetime. However, through conversion narratives from Metro Church members, I show that conversion is a process that involves extended periods of interaction, research, and evaluation.

Moreover, I demonstrate how the *habitus* has structured my informants to consider Christianity as an option because many have once interacted with the religion in their lifetime. These conversion accounts act more as processes of biographical reconstructions that are constantly reinterpreted in the face of new experiences. Conversion experiences are a lens through which to view previous life events. My informants demonstrate an adaptation and negotiation of their Chinese traditions. They create a hybridized identity, seeing their Chinese traditions through a Christian lens. Metro Church members are not unsuspecting victims of the imperialistic tendencies of Christianity. On the contrary, they have come to terms with their identity as Christian and Chinese. Being Christian allows them to add another layer of meaning to their Chinese ethnicity.

With this understanding in mind, turning to Bourdieu's theory of capital becomes an important and essential component of my analysis. He shows how capital can manifest itself in different forms other than in economic and monetary terms. Since the majority of Metro Church members are already well-off financially, conversion to Christianity grants them access to other forms of capital. Despite their marginalized status in Malaysia, I show how Metro Church members' conversion to Christianity serves to maximize their

potential to acquire cultural capital. This cultural capital entails mastery of English and understanding of western modes of thinking. Both are utilized to empower and navigate their lives in an environment that marginalizes them for their ethnicity and religion.

Nevertheless, if inequality is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, then it is also vital to analyze how cultural capital may not function strictly as empowerment for the marginalized. Although my informants converted to Christianity as a form of strategy to optimize access cultural capital in the form of westernized thinking and mastery in English, I also demonstrated that access to this capital is limited and unequal. It is limited and unequal because non-English speaking and less-westernized, culturally “lower” Chinese Malaysians are unable to access this capital. This creates an instance of unequal belonging.

My findings begin to show how the discourse on hybridity as adopted by many postcolonial scholars needs to be re-evaluated. We need to construct a more useful analytical concept to better understand lives of marginalized people on the ground. My concept of unequal belonging nuances hybridity. With this concept, we can begin to explore the intricate process of constructing hybrid identities on the ground. More importantly, unequal belonging interrogates hybridity’s potential as a tool for social change. The following chapter will explore these ideas as I begin to explore the significance of my findings in postcolonial studies and hybridity.

CHAPTER FIVE: UNEQUAL BELONGING AND THE HYBRID SPIRIT

After half a year of fieldwork, I returned to the United States to complete my project. The community I was leaving behind had become more to me than simply research participants. The pastor offered his prayers for my safe return and success, and at a going away party held in my honor, the most often expressed sentiment of the community was a strangely comforting, “God bless you.” At that moment it did not matter that our views of God were different, or that I was not Pentecostal and definitely did I speak in tongues, I was one of them. They exclaimed such things as “I’m so glad that I could help you with your project,” or “You’re going to do great, Kit,” although many of them did not understand my research perspective.

Back in the United States, my friends asked me to comment on my experience in the field. I told them that they were the nicest people I had ever met and that part of me regretted the fact that I might have to subject my participants’ lives, identities, and theological outlooks to intense and critical academic scrutiny. While some understood my dilemma, others were puzzled why I felt this way, as if I had somehow “gone native.” It is because of this dilemma that I have continuously struggled to strike a balance between honoring my participants’ experience – no matter how bizarre I find their rituals and lives – and being a responsible and critical scholar of religion. On the one hand, Metro Church members see me as a godly person whose work will inspire other Christians to

study more about religion. On the other hand, my colleagues and friends from graduate school expect me not to pull any punches -- to critique and expose the mechanisms and power dynamics behind the cries of "Hallelujah" and "Amen." But do I have to choose between one and the other?

In the previous chapters, I explore the historical and social context of the Malaysian Chinese community. I demonstrate how contemporary Malaysia continues to be affected by the British "divide and conquer" policy that reifies and essentializes the nation's various ethnic groups. My interviews and fieldwork demonstrate that Metro Church members' identities are in constant flux; they construct and negotiate their identities as simultaneously Chinese and Christian. As devout Christians, the Malaysian Chinese community holds fast to their religious convictions, and often times their conversion to Christianity creates a reorientation of their minority status within Malaysia. More than just a marker of identity, Christianity is a site where some Chinese Malaysians are able to gain access to cultural capital. Conversion to Christianity serves as a way of maximizing their social position in Malaysia. However, access to this capital is limited and unequal since only those who have mastered English and are well-versed in western cues and ideals are able to access this capital.

This project's main task is to interrogate the assertion in postcolonial scholarship that hybrid identities function as a form of resistance for marginalized communities. Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated that identities are not unitary or stable. The dozens of interviews and observations on which this project is based, coupled with the literature on ethnicity, religion, and postcolonialism, demonstrate that identities are

constructed, malleable, and negotiated. Nevertheless, these identity constructions are constrained by the cultural givens of *habitus*.

In this final chapter, I incorporate my findings from the previous chapters and bring them into conversation with the larger discussion of hybridity. This chapter argues that Metro Church members are engaged in what I have called “unequal belonging.” That is, they privilege one marker of their identity over another: “unequal” in the sense that not all members of the larger community, Chinese Malaysians, are the same; some members of the community have more cultural capital and a “higher” status than others. Thus, westernized-English-speaking Chinese Christians (what I call Modern Chinese) have higher status, socially and culturally, than non-English-speaking, or at least non-Christian, Chinese (what I have called the Chinese Chinese). In concert with some of Bourdieu’s theoretical principles, unequal belonging highlights the ways that hybridity, although a useful and helpful term, fails to capture the nuanced workings of privilege and power that are inherent within marginalized groups. First, I explain how Bourdieu’s theoretical conceptions help show unequal belonging in the lives of Metro Church members. This is especially relevant when addressing the issue of religious syncretism. Next, I explore how the scholarship on syncretism, especially missiological studies and early anthropological studies, has tended to emphasize a kind of corruption and erosion of culture and religion. Later, I analyze how the scholarship on hybridity is too monolithic to capture Metro Church’s complex and intersecting identities and loyalties. Thus, unequal belonging can help nuance hybridity by paying attention to the workings of power and privilege that exist among marginalized communities. This provides a more complex and multi-directional view of hybridity, such that it is understood to be

simultaneously resistive and oppressive. Metro Church members generally reject the idea that they are hybrid; however, their Chinese-westernized-Christian identities are necessarily a dynamic product of the blending – not always conscious – of a variety of cultural, religious, and ethnic elements.

Unequal Belonging

A close analysis of the everyday lived experience of people on the ground shows that certain types of identity markers are privileged over others at specific times and in specific contexts. In the case of Metro Church members, they cling to facets of their Christian identity while constantly reshaping their Chinese ethnic and cultural identities to accommodate their Christian faith. So, while hybridity is always fraught with negotiation, this unequal belonging indicates that it is not always a mode of resistance.

This is a flaw that many scholars fail to take account. For example, Namsoon Kang argues that the category “Asian” is too homogeneous a category to warrant any effective analysis of such diverse groups of people in Asia. In her article, “Who/What is Asian?” she also states that there needs to be cross-cultural and cross-national analyses of specific Asian countries “in order to explain their own internal features and socio-economic conditions.”³⁶⁵ Kang utilizes Said’s concept of Orientalism and Spivak’s critique of representation to challenge Euro-Western feminists’ “Othering” of Asian women. She also critiques the self-Orientalizing tendencies of Asian theologies. To this end, Kang turns toward Bhabha’s concept of hybridity to counter essentialized

³⁶⁵ Namsoon Kang, “Who/What is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, edited by Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 100.

constructions of identity present in Euro-Western feminists and Asian theologians. By resituating monolithic categories such as ethnicity, class, and race in “in-between spaces,” she argues that hybridity “helps Asians overcome the exoticism of cultural identity.”³⁶⁶

Like Kang, I also find hybridity to be a useful category in describing the fluid boundaries and multiplicities of identities. However, Kang uses hybridity too unproblematically. While Kang is correct in conceptualizing a hybrid Asian identity that pays attention to the trappings of essentialism, hybridity suffers from misuse in the assumption that it necessarily functions as a site of resistance against oppressive structures. I want to go one step further and explore whether this hybrid Asian identity can serve as an instance of oppression. Postcolonial discourse’s conceptual error is assuming a “one size fits all” framework for hybridity from which its values and strategies of resistance can be deduced. Hybrid identities can be further nuanced when we begin to interrogate the term not just in its utility to challenge essentialist claims to identity, but by considering how hybridity may mask the workings of power and privilege. Metro Church members have complex identities intersecting and competing loyalties, strategies, and agencies. Bourdieu provides a better way to analyze the hybridity as it relates to unequal belonging because he provides a more nuanced account of how the social order masks its arbitrariness and perpetuates itself by convincing society to accept current existing hierarchies. These hierarchies become powerfully evident in the privileging of English and western and modernist ideals in my data.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 114-115.

Nuancing Hybridity with Bourdieu

Much of Bourdieu's sociological theory addresses the subjectivist and objectivist conceptions of social life: intentional calculations of social actors as well as the underlining social structures that govern people's behaviors. More importantly, his theories are dedicated to the critique of inherited categories and accepted ways of thinking; he focuses on the subtle forms of control wielded by groups such as politicians, educators, intellectuals, and technocrats under the guise of rationality and culture. This is the basis of symbolic violence – the subtle imposition of systems of meaning that legitimize and solidify structures of inequality.³⁶⁷ Bourdieu shows that power is mediated through interior behavioral dispositions of the social actor and through the exterior features of the social structure. This moves beyond functionalist (individual action) and structuralist (exterior constraining forces) positions to explain the relationship between individuals and society, and the power structures that are produced from this relationship.

Habitus plays an important role in Bourdieu's attempt to reconcile the objectivist-subjectivist dichotomy. Briefly, *habitus* is the system of dispositions which internally structures and shapes individuals through inculcation into their social milieu. It becomes the structuring structure that determines how individuals act in the world either with a degree of comfort or discomfort. These "givens" of society are:

laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing, which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for practices since the corrections and adjustments the agents themselves consciously carry out presuppose their mastery of the common code.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 139.

³⁶⁸ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 81.

Of course, these givens are not visibly stated or explained, but are nonetheless “sensible” and “reasonable.”³⁶⁹ It is these givens (the middle class, westernized, and modernistic status) of Metro Church members that I suggest, forms the basis for their privileging of Christian identity. They do not question these givens because church members perceive them as “natural.”

Habitus “contains the solution to the paradoxes of objective meaning without subjective intention. It is the source of these strings of ‘moves’ which are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention.”³⁷⁰ Here, we see why Christianity becomes such an important marker in the construction of identities among Metro Church members. *Habitus* exists as a structure that constrains them to maintain a “pure” Christian belief. Moreover, Christianity becomes the lens through which to view and reconstitute Metro Church members’ Chinese ethnic identities. As I mentioned in Chapter Four, they see this as a “best of both worlds” because Christianity perfects their Chinese identities.

Bourdieu also believes that the social world is divided into distinctive arenas of practice which he calls fields. As a relational term, fields are networks of social relations and positions where agents (individuals, groups or institutions) are located. These locations are determined by the interaction between the rules of the field, *habitus*, and capital. Once established, fields operate within their own internal logic. They possess their own unique set of rules, knowledge, and forms of capital. As such, individuals and groups are engaged in a struggle to maximize their positions in the social order. To fully

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 79.

³⁷⁰ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 62.

understand the concept of field, it is important to pay attention to the “positions” in the field and its relations to one another.³⁷¹ Bourdieu argues that individuals occupy certain positions in various fields. They are defined by their relational position within the field’s distribution of capital. In this scheme, fields are “networks of relations between individuals and institutions competitively engaged in the dynamics of cultural production, pursuit, consumption, and/or accumulation... invariably in one’s *interest*... Thus each of us – by second nature because we have internalized this entire system – develops *strategies* to either maintain or improve our positions in this relational network of power that is the social world.”³⁷² Fields are thus complex arenas that consist of producers, consumers, distributors, legitimators, and regulatory bodies. David Swartz notes that “field analysis calls attention to the social conditions of struggle that shape cultural production. Even supposed neutral cultural practices are, according to Bourdieu, embedded in systems of social as well as intellectual distinctions.”³⁷³

Metro Church and its members belong to a religious field. This religious field is structured by a struggle between variously positioned agents and institutions over cultural capital. As Bourdieu states in his essay, “Genesis and the Structure of the Religious Field,” religion possesses two functions with political ramifications: first, it legitimates various social order; second, it provides people with the justification to make sense of

³⁷¹ Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 44.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁷³ David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 117.

their positions in the social order.³⁷⁴ It is this second function that is an important aspect in our understanding of hybridity and Metro Church's rejection of religious syncretism.

As I demonstrated in Chapter Three, ethnic identities among Malaysian Chinese do not necessarily conform along the primordialist/constructivist dichotomies. Rather, they manifest both tendencies. For Metro Church members, Chineseness is a contested and negotiated term. It is simultaneously a product of self ascription and ascription by outside forces. Externally, the pro-Malay government has stigmatized the Chinese as greedy, money-minded foreigners who cannot be trusted. This is the state-imposed identity that the Chinese members of Metro Church have to contend with on a daily basis. Internally, however, they reinscribe their own markers of Chineseness as an alternative to these state-imposed identities. These self-ascriptions of ethnic identity can be transgressive in nature, since they are actively engaged in reconstructing an identity that defies the stereotypes associated with being a Chinese. I have already demonstrated how this is especially the case with the demarcation between what I call the Modern Chinese and Chinese Chinese. These Modern Chinese do not ascribe to categories traditionally associated with being Chinese. They are the "not quite" of the Chinese.³⁷⁵ Their very presence disrupts bounded notions of culture, religion, and ethnicity. Yet, these identities may perpetuate oppression among other marginalized groups.

³⁷⁴ Bourdieu, "Genesis and the Structure of the Religious Field," 17.

³⁷⁵ Here, I am referencing to Bhabha's idea of colonial mimicry in *The Location of Culture* which is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable 'Other,' as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite." (122) It is worth mentioning again that Bhabha's mimic and hybrid person presents the best strategy in resisting colonial discourse. The simple presence of the "Other" creates an ambivalence which destabilizes structures of authority and essentialisms by turning the gaze back upon the eye of power.

In Chapter Four, I explained how Christianity provides Metro Church members access to various forms of capital. In particular, the cultural capital acquired by Metro Church members can be transformed into other forms of capital. Depending on the place and dispositions of church members, the Chinese religious and cultural traditions may or may not be positively received by members. In doing so, members are able move up in their social positions and acquire the recognition and capacity to define what is legitimate and valuable. Even though Christianity provides them with the means to resist negativity associated with being Chinese in Malaysia, it also affords them cultural capital that is not available to all. While the Chinese Christians gain extra capital, the Chinese Chinese are denied these opportunities. As I will show in the next section, while Metro Church members claim to be simultaneously Christian and Chinese, they privilege their Christian commitments over other markers of identity. Hybridity thus is too simplistic to analyze the potentially disguised deep-seated inequalities within marginalized groups. This is especially evident when addressing the issue of syncretism.

Syncretism: The Dirty “S” Word

Syncretism is a contentious term that is usually associated with notions of contamination and impurity. The term goes beyond the purview of religion, as it is also associated with culture. In addition, syncretism has been burdened with many different attributes, beginning with a negative view, to a more neutral stance, and finally a positive reclamation of the term.³⁷⁶ In this section, I analyze some of the scholarship on

³⁷⁶ The scholarship on syncretism is vast and complex. The term itself is also problematic and often serves the Christian missionary labeling of corruption and impurity. Some scholars have accused syncretism as a term to belittle religions of less developed areas or peoples. At the same time, syncretism

syncretism while interspersing it with my analysis of Metro Church members' views on religious and cultural mixing.

In Chapter Four, I analyzed how Metro Church members reconstitute Chinese cultural celebrations and observations such as Chinese New Year and *Qing Ming* to create a new understanding that is meaningful to church members. Conversion to Christianity allows church members to add another layer of meaning to their Chinese ethnicity. Even though Metro Church members are constantly negotiating their cultural and ethnic identities, they are insistent in maintaining strict boundaries around their religious beliefs and practices. They believe that syncretism and religious mixing will corrupt their spiritual faculties, causing them to “backslide” in their Christian faith. I should also point out that I am not interested in exploring the topic of syncretism along theological arguments, such as examining the “authenticity” of Christian identities or deciding who is “more Christian” than the other. Rather, I want to examine how Metro Church members' rigid outlook of Christianity contributes to unequal belonging.

denotes an amalgamation and hybridization of various distinctive cultural components. One of the most complex parts of studying syncretism is the problem of definition. Syncretism is criticized as being either too broad or too reductionistic to warrant any analytical purchase. It becomes a pejorative term when we bring in issues of power, colonization, and domination. Additionally, syncretism is used interchangeably alongside related concepts as hybridization and creolization in attempts to move away from the colonial implications of the term. Religious scholars, anthropologists and cultural historians alike have tried to develop syncretism as a more neutral term. Still, others are more concerned with the *uses* of syncretism rather than trying to develop a useful definition to the term. For more information on the definitions and problematic of syncretism, see Michael Pye, “Syncretism and Ambiguity,” in *Numen* 18 (1971): 83-93; Andre Droogers, “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem,” in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by Jerald Gort, et.al. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 7-25; Stephan Palmié, “Against Syncretism: ‘Africanizing and ‘Cubanizing’ Discourses in North American Orisa Worship,” in *Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*, edited by Richard Fardon (New York: Routledge, 1995), 69-100; Charles Stewart, “Syncretism and its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture,” in *Diacritics* 29, no.3 (1999): 40-62; Karen L. King, “The Politics of Syncretism and the Problem of Defining Gnosticism,” in *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historique* 27, no.3 (2001): 461-479; and Siv-Ellen Kraft, “To Mix or Not to Mix: Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism in the History of Theosophy,” in *Numen* 49 (2002): 142-177.

When I asked church members their views on Catholicism, many of them expressed doubt that Catholics were real Christians, since they believe Catholicism runs counter to their perceived orthodoxy of Christianity. For Mrs. Loring Gan, stepping into a Catholic church was a “weird and scary” affair. When she attended a Catholic high school in Kuala Lumpur, she was required to attend chapel every Friday. She said that she hated the experience; the chapel frightened her because of “the weird foreign statues.” She also described that she had to attend confession whenever she did something wrong. Loring told me that she also found the nuns to be very intimidating and cruel. Loring’s fear of statues points toward the Protestant aversion to idol worship. Like Loring, Metro Church members’ biggest criticism about Catholicism is on the idolatrous nature of Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary. The existence of saints and other rituals, my informants claimed, were also in direct violation of Christian beliefs. They hold that saints and the Virgin Mary supplant Jesus’ exclusive authority to save sinners, and that praying to them violates the sovereignty of Jesus.

Orsi makes the claim in *Between Heaven and Earth* that Catholicism’s perceived foreignness comes as a result of Protestant views on syncretism and orthodoxy. He argues that scholars of religion are heavily Protestant-centric where beliefs and doctrines are privileged over vulgar “material” religions such as Catholicism. He also argues that “the modern world has assiduously and systematically disciplined the senses not to experience sacred presence; the imaginations of the moderns are trained towards sacred absence.”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁷ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 12. Orsi joins other thinkers such as Talal Asad in arguing that categories such as “meaning-making” and “belief” cannot be accurately employed to understand religion. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). In moving away from religion as beliefs, Orsi states that religions should be conceived as “lived.” See also Nancy Ammerman, ed., *Everyday Religion:*

Instead, Orsi stresses the relational aspect of religion where tangibility is important in negotiating various Catholic saints and religious figures. This experiential quality is something that modernity and many Protestant religious scholars and practitioners have found to be bizarre, shunning these sentiments in favor of thought and reason.³⁷⁸

Church members' claims on the inherent syncretistic nature of Catholicism also support the negative view of syncretism because they see syncretism as a corruption that compromises Christianity's unique message.³⁷⁹ In particular, missiologists and theologians lament the blending of local religious practices with Christianity. For example, Bengt Sundkler, a German Lutheran missionary who worked among the Bantu people in South Africa during the 1930s, did not appreciate the blending of local Bantu practices within the indigenous churches. He charged that the local Bantu Church had become "the bridge over which Africans are brought back to heathenism."³⁸⁰ Sundkler's claim corresponds with the discourse in Christian mission studies in which missionaries

Observing Modern Religious Lives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Robert Orsi, "The 'So-Called History' of the Study of Religion," in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20 (2008): 134-138; and Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

³⁷⁸ Robert Orsi, "When 2+2=5," *The American Scholar*, Spring 2007, <http://theamericanscholar.org/when-2-2-5/#.UU4ymDd4-jY> (accessed March 18, 2013).

³⁷⁹ *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edition defines syncretism as "a replacement or a dilution of essential elements of the gospel." Furthermore, syncretism is "traditionally... wrong," and "must be stopped or reversed." The dictionary however, acknowledges the differences in expressions of Christianity in various cultural and ethnic contexts. So, in resolving problems involving syncretism, the dictionary suggests that the Bible should function as the "traditional" and "normative" reference point. See A.S. Moreau, "Syncretism," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edition, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1158-1160. See also Robert J. Schreiter, "Defining Syncretism: An Interim Report," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17, no.2 (1993): 50-53.

³⁸⁰ Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 297.

were trying to make sense of the rise of localized independent churches in non-Western lands.³⁸¹ Here, the language associated with syncretism is one of erosion and corruption.

In what follows, I analyze four narratives of syncretism as a dilution of Christianity. The examples below demonstrate how syncretism is associated by Metro Church members with the unacceptable borrowing and mixing of non-Christian elements into Christianity. Rosie Hung, who is in her late 20s recalls her childhood struggles with being a Christian. She converted to Christianity in high school and her family converted not too long after her conversion. But her father continued visiting Chinese temples while attending church every Sunday. He also told her to accompany him to pray to the Chinese gods. This created a lot of stress for Rosie and her family. Unable to reconcile to the idea of having two competing and different religious systems, Rosie finally gave her father an ultimatum to “make a decision and stop going to temples.” She told him to either continue to pray to the Chinese deities or to put his faith wholeheartedly in Jesus. After a painstakingly slow process, her father eventually decided to stop visiting temples and chose only to attend church, much to Rosie’s delight. Recently, Rosie’s father gained the ability to speak in tongues after receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. She and her family interpreted this as an outward sign of God’s presence and blessing in his life.³⁸²

³⁸¹ For other examples, see J.D.Y. Peel, “Syncretism and Religious Change,” in *Comparative Study in Society and History* 10, no.2 (1968): 121-141; Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, “Responding to Split-Level Christianity and Folk Religion,” in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 16, no.4 (1999): 173-182. See also Hendrik Kraemer, “Syncretism as a Religious and a Missionary Problem,” in *International Review of Missions* 43, no.3 (1954): 253-273.

³⁸² In Pentecostal scholarship, the term “glossolalia” is commonly used to denote a particular kind of linguistic ability born out of a religious experience in which Christians have been “gifted” with. Glossolalia is also known as “free vocalization” – a connected sequence of speech sounds that do not belong to the original language as well as unknown to the speaker. Some Pentecostals equate tongue speaking as speaking the language of heaven, or God’s spirit. Whether or not these are actual manifestations of God’s spirit as claimed by those who possess the ability to speak in tongues, is up for

The important point to take into account here is Rosie's ultimatum to her father. The practice of straddling two competing religious systems was ultimately unacceptable and she stressed that Chinese religious traditions are incompatible with Christianity. Rosie cannot mix these two different religions together. Syncretistic beliefs and what she and other church members refer to as appropriating other religious traditions that run contrary to Christianity are instances of backsliding from the Christian faith. For church members, backsliding implies a regression of one's Christian faith back to a pre-conversion state where God ceases to be the central focus of one's life.

Similar to Rosie, college student Justin Chang also believes that a true Christian cannot subscribe to two differing religious views. He claims that Christians who blend Christianity with Chinese religious practices are confused. He believes that if one reads the Bible carefully, syncretistic blending of religions should not even be entertained: "If they have gone to Bible Study, they should know that they shouldn't do it." He also adds that those Christians who continue to engage in syncretistic practices need to re-evaluate

debate. The meaning and significance of speaking in tongues have caused a stir in psychological, linguistic, sociological, anthropological, philological, and cultural studies. In addition, non-glossolalist Christians, usually mainline and some sectors of evangelical Christians are suspicious of Pentecostal Christians' pneumatic claims. Nevertheless, with the ever increasing number of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians in the Global South, this phenomenon cannot be easily dismissed as pathological behavior. See for example, William J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); Felicitas Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Nils G. Holm, "Pentecostalism: Conversion and Charismata," in *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 1, no.3 (1991): 135-151; Mark J. Cartledge, "Interpreting Charismatic Experience: Hypnosis, Altered States of Consciousness and the Holy Spirit?" in *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 6, no.13 (1998): 117-132; Heather Kavan, "Glossolalia and Altered States of Consciousness in two New Zealand Religious Movements," in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19, no.2 (2004): 171-184; Mark J. Cartledge, ed., *Speaking in Tongues: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Waynesboro: Paternoster, 2006); Francis Machingura, "The Significance of Glossolalia in the Apostolic Faith Mission, Zimbabwe," in *Studies in World Christianity* 17, no.1 (2011): 12-29; and W. Paul Williamson, and Ralph W. Hood Jr., "Spirit Baptism: A Phenomenological Study of Religious Experience," in *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14, no.6 (2011): 543-559.

their beliefs and re-read the Bible so that they can repent and obey God's commandments.

For Metro Church members, syncretism also involves practicing exercise techniques that they perceive to be "spiritual" in nature such as yoga and *Qi Gong*. I asked Tiffany Feng about her views regarding Christians who participate in yoga. As a health instructor herself, she consciously avoids yoga in her own fitness regime. She and many Metro Church members understand yoga as a devious method employed by ungodly forces to corrupt the Christian believer from God. Tiffany claims that although there is much debate about yoga being "just an exercise," she has heard stories that in reality, yoga is the practice of worshipping other gods and objects, namely the sun. So, she simply chooses to stay away from yoga. Finally, I asked Janet Lim about her views on traditional Chinese martial arts and exercise such as *Tai Chi* and *Qi Gong*. Janet, who grew up in a "traditional" Chinese family, finds nothing wrong with the practice of *Tai Chi* since it is "just an exercise" that promotes healthy breathing techniques and body movements. However, she rejects the practice of *Qi Gong*. She claims that it was a form of martial arts that cultivates the *qi*, or life energy. She also claims that *Qi Gong* promotes access to higher realms of awareness and consciousness, which raises all sorts of red flags for her. For Janet, practicing *Qi Gong* is akin to tapping into forces that may not come from God. Indeed, only God is in control of her awareness and life.

Rosie, Justin, Tiffany, and Janet's narratives do not appear to leave much room for flexibility and adaptation. They set boundaries on their Christian identity and exclude syncretistic practices that they deem as forbidden by the teachings of the Bible. This echoes Murray Rubinstein's study on Taiwanese Pentecostals. In "Holy Spirit Taiwan:

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in the Republic of China,” she observes that Taiwanese Pentecostals are careful to use the Bible “as the basis for all statements and arguments they make about the way the supernatural and the natural realms are constituted [and] as the moral basis for all acts and behaviors of individuals in society.”³⁸³ Indeed, Metro Church members are quick to condemn syncretistic acts as moments of inauthenticity and as signs of backsliding in one’s faith commitments.

While church members reconstitute their traditional Chinese cultural practices through the lens of their Christian faith, they are generally unreflective of their Christian beliefs; Christianity is accepted as is. The burden lies in conforming Chinese cultural practices to religious identities.³⁸⁴ While traditional Chinese practices undergo intense scrutiny in their Christian commitments, this does not seem to apply to Christian beliefs. Why? Also, why is there a strong opposition against a syncretistic religious identity? Here, I find it important to bring Bourdieu back into the discussion. Metro Church members are constrained to the *habitus* in which they unconsciously internalize their ways of living as natural. Moreover, Metro Church members occupy positions in various fields. In this scheme, fields are networks of relations between individuals and institutions competitively engaged in the accumulation of capital. In this case, church members occupy a religious field. As I have already explored in Chapter Four, Metro

³⁸³ Murray Rubinstein, “Holy Spirit Taiwan: Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in the Republic of China,” in *Christianity in China from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, edited by Daniel H. Bays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 360.

³⁸⁴ The privileging of Christian beliefs and traditions are evident even though Christianity itself is a thoroughly hybridized religion. See Eric Maroney, *Religious Syncretism* (London: SCM Press, 2006). Maroney argues that religious syncretism, especially with regards to the Abrahamic faiths, has always been occurring and continues to do so. As such, all religions are syncretistic. (168) Although Maroney’s book is an introductory text to the complex notion of syncretism, something which I have pointed out earlier, the text provides excellent examples on how syncretism works.

Church members converted to Christianity because it would, in part, provide them access to cultural capital.

To reiterate, for Bourdieu, *habitus* is largely unconscious and “contains the solution to the paradoxes of objective meaning without subjective intention. It is the source of these strings of ‘moves’ that are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention.”³⁸⁵ Therefore, the accumulation of capital is a strategy within the religious field. Bourdieu is particularly concerned with how powerful positions within a field can perpetrate symbolic violence on less powerful agents. Cultural mechanisms such as education and cultural knowhow may impose dominant perspectives on the rest of the population in order to legitimate power. Since the overarching theme of Bourdieu’s work is exposing the sources and reproduction of social inequality, his concept of the religious field is especially helpful in studying the relationship between religion, class, and power.

Habitus plays an important role in explaining why Christianity is privileged over Chinese traditions. The social field they belong to predisposes them to articulate a Christian identity at the expense Chinese culture. Through this unconscious privileging of Christianity, Metro Church members are engaged in unequal belonging. For example, spiritual warfare is a central issue for Metro Church members. More than once during my fieldwork, I heard sermons reinforcing this idea. In particular, these sermons speak of non-Christian sacred spaces as places where the evil forces dwell. For example, Vesak is an important celebration for Buddhists in the country. Church members often receive invitations from their Buddhist friends to participate in these celebrations in temples.

³⁸⁵ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 62.

Pastor Wu discourages church members from attending these celebrations and justifies this by arguing that the Christian God is a “jealous God.” More importantly, he says, visiting Chinese temples and attending Chinese religious festivals may lead to spiritual attacks by demonic forces.

While Metro Church members may be at a positional disadvantage compared to the majority Malay population of Malaysia, they hold distinctive advantage in terms of education and knowledge of western worldviews; conversion to Christianity is one of the ways to increase this advantage. Thus, church members construct Chinese identities that resist and move away from the imposed stereotypical Chinese images by the majority Malays. Nonetheless, they construct these identities at the expense of non-Christian and non-English speaking Chinese (i.e. the Chinese Chinese). To this end, church members cause symbolic violence – the unnoticed and partly unconscious domination that everyday social habits maintain over the conscious subject – on non-Christian Chinese. The acquisition of cultural capital that is supposed to empower the Chinese minority in Malaysia also reinforces the negative and essentializing stereotypes associated with Chinese Malaysians toward the Chinese Chinese. When we utilize unequal belonging to analyze the current discourse of hybridity, we begin to see how hybridity may not always be a tool of resistance. There are different types of Chinese groups within the rubric of Chinese Malaysians, and some groups hold “higher” status than others. In this case, it is the westernized-Christian Chinese of Metro Church that have more access to cultural capital than others. Hybridity becomes too unyielding as a concept to nuance the highly complex social context of the Malaysian Chinese community.

From a Negative Syncretism to a Positive Hybridity

In the previous section, I analyzed Metro Church members' privileging and maintenance of Christian identity over their Chinese ethnic identity as an instance of unequal belonging. Despite suffering a double minority status as Chinese and Christians in Malaysia, a Christian identity affords the Chinese members of Metro Church access to cultural capital. In particular, Christianity endows them with modern western knowledge and mastery of English.³⁸⁶ I demonstrated that Metro Church members' views of syncretism are entrenched along a religious framework that denotes a corruption of faith. However, syncretism, as an analytical category, goes beyond the confines religion; various scholars have utilized this category in their respective fields of study. While theologians and missionaries associate syncretism with corruption of Christian beliefs, interestingly, early anthropologists also share these same views. Although anthropologists do not have a stake in any particular religious commitments and affiliations, they also perceive syncretism as a dilution and corruption of purity. The difference is that anthropologists view syncretism as a loss of authentic and pure cultures.

Similar to theologians and missiologists, early twentieth century anthropologists such as Franz Boas viewed culture as distinct, isolated, and self-contained. Boas argues that it is only when different groups of people come into contact with one another through hunting, trade, and migration, that cultural mixing and appropriation would occur. Boas, an influential figure in anthropology, developed the concept of diffusionism to challenge the biological determination and racist assumptions found in early

³⁸⁶ This translates to entrance to a global economic framework that leads to education and participation in western economic domination. For more information, see Ong, and Nonini, eds., *Ungrounded Empires*; and Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.

anthropological writings that categorized the progression of various world cultures in a hierarchical relationship to European civilization.³⁸⁷ Instead, he focused on the distribution of traits among different cultures. For Boas, culture is distinct and possesses its own inner dynamism that is shaped by its own particular historical, social, and psychological context.³⁸⁸ Thus, Boas privileges cultural differences over similarities.

By the 1940s, American anthropologists developed a more positive attitude toward syncretism. For instance, Melville Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past*, published in 1941, debunks the idea that African Americans did not possess any cultural past. A student of Boas, Herskovits conceptualized a tree-like model of cultural diffusionism; he identifying the African American's original source from West Africa.³⁸⁹ Herskovits traces the histories and cultures of African Americans and argues for the continuation of the black peoples of West Africa and those in the United States.

Herskovits' model of syncretism reflects the post-World War II social movement to consolidate and create a single national identity out of the various (i.e. different) groups of peoples living in the Americas.³⁹⁰ More importantly, his version of syncretism

³⁸⁷ For an alternative explanation of Boas' friendlier and "liberal" interpretation of culture, see Vernon J. Williams, *The Social Sciences and Theories of Race* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

³⁸⁸ For more information, see Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1938). Originally published in 1911, *The Mind* is would later become the blueprint for the idea cultural relativism. Boas hoped that the publication of his book would promote greater tolerance for forms of civilization different from one's own, and provide a learning opportunity to look on "foreign races" with greater sympathy.

³⁸⁹ See Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941). For more information on Boas' influence on the work of Herskovits, see Geyla Frank, "Melville J. Herskovits on the African and Jewish Diasporas: Race, Culture and Modern Anthropology," in *Identities* 8, no.2 (2001): 173-209. See also Jerry Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

³⁹⁰ The positive spin on syncretism adopted by American anthropologists was vastly different from British and European anthropological attitudes. The acknowledgement of, and discussions of racial mixture

is one of survival and continuation of cultural meanings and identities. Rather than an instance of corruption, Herskovits sees syncretism as a valuable concept to evaluate how diverse cultures can become integrated and assimilated into dominant society. The problem with Herskovits' model is that acculturation is conceived in terms of progression, such that "if a person is placed in a new cultural setting he or she will acculturate progressively, proceeding along a continuum towards some ultimate completion."³⁹¹ Despite Herskovits' positive affirmation of syncretism as a process of cultural integration, his idea of syncretism is based on a teleological outlook. He remains entrenched in the modern European idea of culture as a set of rigid, predictable patterns. Thus, syncretism is seen as a liminal stage and an unfinished expression of culture that ultimately leads to cultural assimilation.³⁹²

Despite Metro Church's negative attitudes on syncretism, no religion remains immune to mixing and boundary-crossings. Certainly, many Christians do not deny that

is much more developed in the American continent. Thus, the affirmative stance on syncretism contributed towards the development of the "melting pot" ideology in the United States in the 1940s. Indeed, the New World and African contexts presented very different political situations that made for different anthropological fieldwork experience. British anthropologists concentrated most of their research in the African continent, where many regions were still under the yoke of European colonial powers. Meanwhile, American anthropologists concentrated most of their research in the American continent where many regions were mostly free of colonial rule in the preceding century, and began conceiving a national identity that is based on a "melting pot" ideology. Benedict Anderson shows in *Imagined Communities*, that it was the "creole pioneers" that fought for independence in the New World (47-65). Perhaps with the realization of their mixed heritage, these pioneers are more sympathetic towards a nationalistic identity that incorporates mixture in a way that European nationalisms could not. Still, we should point out that even though these creole pioneers have acknowledged their mixed heritage relative to their European counterparts, no such attitudes were afforded towards indigenous groups and African slaves who were regarded as sub-human. This is a dangerous double-edged sword. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, especially "Chapter 4: Creole Pioneers," 47-66.

³⁹¹ Shaw, and Stewart, "Introduction," in Shaw, and Stewart, eds., *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, 6.

³⁹² For more information, see Andrew Apter, "Herskovits' Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora," in *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 235-260.

some level of mixing and appropriation is and has been present in Christianity.³⁹³ Hendrik Kraemer argues in *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* that syncretism, while “a necessary and normal trait in the religions that live on the primitive apprehension of existence,” is illegitimate.³⁹⁴ Kraemer, an Indologist turned missionary in Dutch Indonesia in the 1930s, argues that “Biblical realism” is a form of ideal Christianity in direct contrast to syncretism.³⁹⁵ Therefore, syncretism is incompatible with Christianity. He believes that missionaries establishing local indigenous churches as “a systematic attempt to combine, blend and reconcile inharmonious, even conflicting, religious elements in a new so-called synthesis.”³⁹⁶ Kraemer tries to reconcile syncretism with the missionary imperative and observes that syncretism is an inevitable effect of inculturation. Kraemer’s fear of syncretism is based on syncretism’s ability to alter Christianity’s core beliefs and identities. As such, great care must be taken to distinguish between the negative category of syncretism and the neutral “absorption” of non-Christian elements into Christianity.³⁹⁷

³⁹³ Not all theologians and missiologists hold negative views on syncretism. For example, Adolf von Harnack in *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* argues that syncretism was present in Christianity. However, he also believed that it was a “special kind of syncretism... namely the syncretism of a universal religion” because it had to cater to the pagan world in order to establish its church. (313) Moreover, Christianity was special because it incorporated and embraced everything – it was a religion available for all people; Christianity became a syncretistic religion “*par excellence*.” See Adolf von Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, translated by James Moffatt (New York: Williams and Norgate, 1904).

³⁹⁴ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 2nd edition (New York: International Missionary Council, 1947), 203.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 207.

³⁹⁶ Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1956), 392.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 398. For other examples on the negative definitions of syncretism, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol.1 Pt.2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1939); William A. Visser’t Hooft, *No Other Name*:

It is important to point out that Metro Church members' concerns about syncretism are less about cultural mixing than about religious loyalties and competing sources of spiritual power. Although there appears to be a clear demarcation between "real" and "backslid" Christians, they point out that they are less concerned with "cultural" mixing that does not violate the teachings of the Bible.³⁹⁸ One topic that is repeatedly discussed is how to behave at a traditional Chinese funeral. The answers are varied. Many church members speak of substituting joss sticks with flowers in Chinese funeral rites. Others continue to hold joss sticks, but maintain that this is permissible as long as there is no intentionality behind it. For example, Mrs. Loring Gan did not see why there was such a "big fuss" with holding joss sticks since they were merely objects. For her, the act of offering joss sticks to the deceased "means nothing." Accordingly, the

The Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism (London: SCM Press, 1966); G.C. Oosthuizen, *The Theology of South African Messiah* (Leiden: Brill, 1967); Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986); and Lesslie Newbigin, *A World in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994).

³⁹⁸ Some theologians have attempted to trade the word "syncretism" for "contextualization" and "inculturation. To address the relationship between Christianity and the syncretistic elements of local cultures, the post-Vatican II Catholic Church and evangelicals created categories such as "inculturation" and "indigenization" to differentiate between what is permissible and what is forbidden in adapting local cultures in Christianity. For the Catholic Church, they contend that since God's Word is transcendent and transcultural, it is fully adaptable to conform to local cultures and idioms. Evangelicals on the other hand, are more cautious in their approach. They attempt to examine what elements of culture are permissible for local churches. Accordingly, they argue that any authentic form of Christian contextualization must maintain the authority of Scripture as the lens to interpret all forms of cultural expression. See Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); Carl F. Slarkoff, *A Theology of the In-Between: The Value of Syncretic Process* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002); and Gailyn Van Rheen, ed. *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2006). See also example, Louis Lutzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989); David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001); and Millar J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004). See also David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), especially "Chapter Three: Theology in Cultural Context," 99-132.

ultimate goal of holding and using joss sticks during Chinese funerals is to “pay respect to the dead and not to make a scene.”

Justin Chang does not share Loring’s views. He recalls an experience at a traditional Chinese funeral where his family refrained from performing acts that they construed as non-Christian. These acts involved using joss sticks to offer prayers for the deceased, bowing before the coffin, and burning “hell money.” Justin reasons that the Bible is specific in forbidding such practices. Unlike Loring’s explanation, Justin believes that the practice of accommodating Chinese religious practices can be a slippery slope and engaging in such practices might ultimately erode their Christian faith. The examples above point out Metro Church members’ tensions in reconciling their Chinese and Christian identities even though church members have an exclusivist view of Christianity,

Some scholars have made attempts to nuance this difficult category by arguing for a compartmentalization of identity markers. Nicole Constable’s fieldwork among Hakka Christians in Hong Kong examines how they make sense of their Chinese, Christian, and Hakka identities. In *Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits: A Hakka Community in Hong Kong*, she argues that the Hakka community in Hong Kong has developed a sophisticated mechanism to create distinctions between the essentials of Christianity, and the secularization of Chinese religious practices.³⁹⁹ In doing so, Constable concludes that Hakka Christians are able to respect both their Chinese past and Christian present.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁹ Nicole Constable, *Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits: A Hakka Community in Hong Kong* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 126.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid. To be sure, Constable also argues that the process of reconciling Hakka Chinese and Christian identities has not been easy. Rather, it is an ongoing process.

Certainly, Constable's research provides some explanation for the tensions in reconciling Metro Church members' Chinese and Christian identities. However, I do not think that these compartmentalizations exist in a harmonious fashion or as a conscious process. While I am not disputing Constable's findings, they do not capture the specific contextuality of Malaysian Chinese Christians. Constable does not address why Christian beliefs are held intact and free of scrutiny while Chinese culture and tradition are subjected to an extensive process of rationalization and secularization. Finally, she does not explain why one "compartment" is more important than another.

Edwin Zehner's study on evangelical Christians in Thailand also attempts to offer an explanation about reconciling Christian and cultural beliefs. In "Orthodox Hybridities," Zehner examines how different sorts of hybridities are deployed among converted Thai Christians. In effect, this enables a conversion to Christianity that is grounded in personal experience and at the same time appears as orthodox, which is important in evangelical Christianity.⁴⁰¹ These "orthodox hybridities" help reconcile Thai Christians' localized setting with the transcultural character of evangelical Christianity.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ Edwin Zehner, "Orthodox Hybridities: Anti-Syncretism and Localization in the Evangelical Christianity of Thailand," in *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no.3 (2005): 586.

⁴⁰² Here, I am reminded of Mikhail Bakhtin's use of hybridity in his work on language and polyphony. Though known for his study on linguistics, Bakhtin's idea of hybridity can be equally applied to identity and culture. In his study on the development of languages, he differentiates between two types of hybridity: organic and intentional. Organic hybridity refers to the unintentional, unconscious hybridization which happens throughout history as a result of unreflective borrowings, appropriations, exchanges, and inventions. There is no such thing as culture in and of itself. The cross-pollination of cultures has always been present in human movements throughout history. It is the appropriation of Chinese cultures and traditions among Metro Church members that forms an acceptable level of hybridity. Meanwhile, they reject the syncretistic mixing of Christianity with "pagan" beliefs, as well as western liberal ideals perceived as "too open-minded" and "corrupt." See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

Zehner notes that his purpose is not to merely point out that “processes of self-hybridity happen,”⁴⁰³ but to find out the mechanisms that are at work. He argues:

One of the reasons that converts can be creative while legitimately assuming themselves to be orthodox is because the effect of the evangelicals’ anti-syncretistic gaze is to focus awareness on certain areas of concern while perceiving other kinds of cultural mixing as always their own. In other words, at the same time that it contests some hybridities, evangelical anti-syncretism also produces a psychological denial of the hybridity occurring in other areas of thought and behavior.⁴⁰⁴

Zehner attempts to nuance the concept of hybridity explaining how certain people hold in tension their orthodox and essentialized identities while allowing the hybridizing process to occur in their day-to-day lives.⁴⁰⁵ This is a negotiative strategy to reconcile between traditions that appear to be incommensurable. Like Constable, Zehner’s argument fails to capture the workings of Metro Church members. The notion of picking and mixing cultural elements does not consider the social locations and positionalities of the social actor. While it is important to recognize the role of agency, it is also equally important to

⁴⁰³ Zehner, *Orthodox Hybridities*,” 587.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 589.

⁴⁰⁵ Here, I am reminded of Richard Gombrich’s study on among Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. In *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Highlands of Ceylon*, Gombrich attempts to reconcile Buddhist practices as advocated in canonical texts and the contemporary, “popular” Buddhist practices that run counter to what the texts say. Accordingly, Gombrich argues that the monks create two separate categories in order to mitigate their obedience to the Buddha and the “worship” of Buddha’s image. He lays out his distinction between Buddhism at the cognitive level and Buddhism at the affective level. We need not go further on this topic as this debate is well-documented in Buddhist Studies. Gombrich’s affect/effect dichotomy has come under criticism, perhaps most famously by Stanley Tambiah, who considered Gombrich’s arguments to be untenable and simplistic. The debate on simplistic dichotomous separation between thought and action, culture and religion, I think, also applies towards studies on Christianity. For a succinct and summary of this debate, see Jacob N. Kinnard, *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999).

explore how agency is exercised within a system of social constraints, linked to the actor's positionalities within specific social contexts.⁴⁰⁶

Even though there is a privileging of Christianity over Chinese cultural traditions among Metro Church members, the struggle to negotiate their Chineseness and Christian faith is constrained by the field of play in a Bourdieuan sense. As I argued in Chapter Three, the socialized setting of Chinese Malaysians during the British colonial period creates the *habitus* that predisposes them to behave in certain unconscious ways. In essence, they are constrained by their historically inherited cultural givens. Accordingly, these givens involve respect for traditional Chinese culture and language, Chinese business savvy, and Confucian ideals. As a minority group, they continue to find utility and emotional connection with these Chinese cultural givens. In addition, they fit well with certain elements of western Christian beliefs and practices. The *habitus* helps to structure Metro Church members as members of the Chinese community in Malaysia. The cultural patterns informed through the *habitus* continue to manifest and exert influence on the structures imposed in their lives.

At the same time, within this *habitus* allows for the agency of church members to create strategic moves to navigate the social field of Chineseness in Malaysia. Strategy, in this sense, emerges from the *habitus* to alter the structure of the field. Becoming Christian, then, involves a strategic move to gain social capital in an environment that

⁴⁰⁶ Floya Anthias makes the case that while hybridity may herald the breaking of ethnocentric and racist structures, it may also be the case that dominant groups could co-opt and pillage other cultural forms to be deployed with new ends. I do not disagree with this. The difference between Anthias' assessments and my project here is that dominance goes beyond the center/periphery divide. Rather, dominance operates within marginalized groups such as those of Metro Church. For more information, see Floya Anthias, "New Hybridities, Old Concepts: The Limits of 'Culture,'" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no.4 (2001): 619-641.

marginalizes Chinese Malaysians. Nevertheless, strategy is rooted in a practical logic that is the emergent product of *habitus* and the social fields in which *habitus* is contextualized. It is the institutional arrangements set up by groups that specify the appropriate means by which goals are to be pursued. Thus, agents individually or collectively deploy strategies to improve or defend their positions in relation to other social agents. Although one can argue that Metro Church members privilege a Christian identity as a strategy to improve their situation in Malaysia, this unequal belonging of privileging Christian identity disempowers other non-Christian Chinese. As I demonstrated in Chapter Four, access to capital is limited because only westernized-Chinese, what I have called Modern Chinese, have access to this capital.

Carsten Colpe critiques the parallel outlook of syncretism within both anthropology and religious studies. He suggests that syncretism needs to move beyond the purview of missionaries and theologians *and* without its theological and religious baggage. In his description of syncretism in Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*, he states that anthropologists and social scientists should explore the function of syncretism by providing a "socio-psychological clarification of readiness for the balancing, subordination and unification of truth."⁴⁰⁷ In doing so, Colpe suggests that scholars develop their own interpretive lens rather than relying on historically perceived meanings of syncretism.

Contemporary anthropologists have since rejected the early model of cultural contact and syncretism. Instead, they maintain that cultures have always been syncretistic

⁴⁰⁷ Carsten Colpe, "Syncretism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 219.

at any given point of time.⁴⁰⁸ Ulf Hannerz suggests that hybridization is now the rule, not the exception. According to Hannerz, complex and asymmetrical flows have reshaped cultures which, given existing forms and meanings of culture are not likely to result in global homogenization. He maintains that “emerging hybridized webs of meaning” are neither spurious nor inauthentic cultures.⁴⁰⁹ Syncretism is a natural and neutral process. Postcolonial and postmodern scholars such as Edward Said and James Clifford have also debunked the earlier approaches to syncretism. Clifford argues that syncretism is not a type of “transition” stage that would disappear as soon as the process of assimilation and acculturation is finished.⁴¹⁰ All cultural traditions, including religious traditions, are based on some kind of interaction either internally or externally. As Said states, “all

⁴⁰⁸ Stewart states in “Syncretism and its Synonyms” that the publication of Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan’s *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* in 1963 signaled the move away from the melting pot theory towards a more multicultural bend within the American social sciences. (53) Glazer and Moynihan argue while it was not the case that the variety of ethnic groups in the United States remained loyal to their country of origin, they also did not become fully homogenized Americans either. Rather, they created new identities and recognized themselves and are recognized by others as members of distinctive groups. Ethnic politics began to take a new course in the post-1960s environment which paid more attention to the recognition and tolerance of ethnic differences rather a blanket acceptance of assimilation of the melting pot ideology. Interestingly, the publication of *Beyond the Melting Pot* coincided with the Vatican II meetings where the Catholic Church was formulating new ways to accept culturally mixed religious expressions where it was once scorned as syncretistic. Ironically, while the Catholic Church was promoting a religious melting pot of sorts with notions of inculturation, American social science and ethnic politics rejected the melting pot idea and began moving towards multiculturalism. See Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City, The Second Edition* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1970). For a more detailed examination on inculturation, see Walter Abbot, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), especially the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

⁴⁰⁹ Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 264.

⁴¹⁰ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 14-15.

cultures are involved in one another; none is simple and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic.”⁴¹¹

While recognizing the syncretistic nature of cultures and religions may be an inescapable fact, pointing this out often amounts to expressions of power, exclusion, and control. Recent developments in the study of syncretism focus on the use of syncretism as a means of exclusion. In particular, essentialized identities become associated with power and domination. When identities become fixed, it is easy for regimes of power to create boundaries and decide who to include or exclude. Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart contend that the enterprise of identifying and describing syncretistic practices is not particularly helpful or useful.⁴¹² They argue instead that an examination of the processes and discourses surrounding syncretism would yield a more fruitful scholarly endeavor. They propose a reconceptualization of the study of syncretism as an uncovering process rather than simply a descriptive project. In other words, scholars should be more concerned with the question of “why is there such an antagonistic attitude towards syncretism?” rather than “what is syncretism?” Shaw and Stewart argue that anti-syncretistic attitudes are frequently associated with the maintenance of purity and religious boundaries.⁴¹³ Thus, persons whose power and privilege are legitimized by the maintenance of boundaries under the guise of religious authenticity are more likely to

⁴¹¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxv.

⁴¹² Rosalind Shaw, and Charles Stewart, “Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism,” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, edited by Rosalind Shaw, and Charles Stewart (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

feel threatened by syncretism because it challenges the fictive nature of religious boundaries.

Similarly, Otto Maduro argues in “On the Theoretical Politics of Defining ‘Religion,’” that religions are:

little more than scholarly concurrence with and re-legitimations of politics and theological attempts by ruling elites to disqualify, marginalize, and eventually stamp out any claims or attempts to modify, disrupt, or subvert the prevailing power arrangements, ‘religious’ or otherwise.⁴¹⁴

Nevertheless, Maduro suggests that we should not abandon the category “religion” altogether. Rather, he proposes religion as “lived within the modality of multiple *simultaneous religious allegiances*.”⁴¹⁵ Syncretism, for Maduro, is one of the possible outcomes of religious practitioners belonging to these alliances.⁴¹⁶ Maduro and Shaw and Stewart’s examples demonstrate how syncretism is no longer viewed negatively. Rather, syncretism has the potential to be a method of resistance against dominant discourses of essentialism because it exposes the fictitious nature of religious boundaries.

For example, Linda Thomas’ study of the African Independent Church in South Africa contends that early European missionary efforts to stamp out any vestiges of African indigenous culture and religion maintained by converted Africans is predicated

⁴¹⁴ Otto Maduro, “On the Theoretical Politics of Defining ‘Religion,’” in *Social Compass* 49, no.4 (2002): 602.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 604.

⁴¹⁶ See also Gustavo Benevides, “Syncretism and Legitimacy in Latin American Religion,” in *An Enduring Flame: Studies of Latino Popular Religiosity*, edited by Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, and Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 1994), 19-46; and Otto Maduro, “Religion under Imperial Duress: Post-colonial Reflections and Proposals,” in *Review of Religious Research* 45, no.3 (2004): 221-234.

on cultural superiority on the part of the missionaries.⁴¹⁷ Therefore, Africans were not considered to be equal to whites and indigenous religious practices were regarded as unimportant and demonic.⁴¹⁸ Despite these efforts, she argues that the church's religious cosmology is derived from a synthesis of precolonial African religion and Protestant Christianity. In particular, black church members developed healing rituals to reorient and reinvent their social reality as a mode of resistance against the country's Apartheid policy. Although it was not a macro (i.e. official and large-scale) resistance against Apartheid, Thomas insists that this syncretistic reappropriation of "microorder" (i.e. mundane, everyday actions) symbols received from Christian missionaries enabled poor black South Africans to "disempower Apartheid structures, to assist marginalized persons to assert their own self-determined religious identity, and to create order in a chaotic macroworld."⁴¹⁹

So far, I have examined syncretism's complex history from its early association with notions of contamination and impurity to its positive reclamation as a mode of resistance against power regimes that advocate exclusionist notions of purity. If we accept Said's assertion that all cultures are hybrid, then our analysis must move toward syncretism's utility in an increasingly globalized world. As Stewart states, "

in a world that valorizes purity and authenticity, it is crucial to attend to the ways in which syncretism is negotiated... Furthermore, denials of syncretism, whether

⁴¹⁷ Linda E. Thomas, "South African Independent Churches, Syncretism, and Black Theology," in *Journal of Religious Thought* 53/54, no.2/1 (1997): 39.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

by academic analysts or the people under study, are every bit as interesting where the compositeness of religious traditions is recognized and accepted.⁴²⁰

In the next section, I shall explore postcolonialism, in particular, Bhabha's contribution to the notion of hybridity as a site of resistance. Yet, as I will also demonstrate, hybridity fails to pay attention to the complex workings of power and privilege that are unconsciously embedded in the Chinese members of Metro Church. In particular, unequal belonging demonstrates that not every Chinese Malaysian stands to benefit from the deployment of hybridity.

Unequal Belonging and its Implications on Postcolonial Discourse

Postcolonial scholars have written extensively on how cultures and identities are composites that are continuously in flux. Yet, they are utterly imbued with unequal power. Thus, within these composites and cultural mixings lies the potential for resistance *and* dominance. Resistance can manifest itself in many forms, and one of the ways to examine this is through the lens of performance.⁴²¹ Syncretism as a form of performance and play views the social actor as an active agent engaged in individual and

⁴²⁰ Stewart, "Syncretism and its Synonyms," 55.

⁴²¹ Here, I am thinking of performance along the lines of Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity. Her highly influential book, *Gender Trouble* utilizes speech-act theory to argue how social reality is constructed through repetitious "performance" of culturally-scripted norms which produces the effect of static or "normalized" identities while obscuring the inherent instability of prescriptive categories. Yet, since social identities are the permanently divided result of the ritualistic repetition of conventions, the potential for subversion can also be achieved. Addressing the issue of gender, Butler argues that through gender performativity, such as drag performance, hegemonic and binary constructions of gender and identities can be exposed. Even though Butler situates her work along the category of gender identity, her theories provide much food for thought for scholars interested in investigations of crypto-religions, especially since religion is "performed" as an instance of survival and resistance See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

collective tinkering of traditions to suit contextual needs.⁴²² The work of Bhabha is most famous for articulating and demonstrating how hybridity, when deployed by marginalized communities, possesses transgressive and resistive qualities within the interstices of social structure that often leave little to no room for such possibilities.

Bhabha believes that the agential creativity of the social actor in constructing hybrid identities can not only bypass binary constructions of identity, but also create a potential for resistance.⁴²³ Bhabha's draws his ideas from the works of Lacan, Derrida,

⁴²² Elsewhere, scholars identify this kind of adaptation as "crypto-religion." According to Maurus Reinkowski, the term is deployed to designate those whose real religious views are not in accord with their official religious affiliation, and are hidden from public knowledge. See Maurus Reinkowski, "Hidden Believers, Hidden Apostates: The Phenomenon of Crypto-Jews and Crypto-Christians in the Middle East," in *Converting Cultures: Religion, Ideology and Transformations of Modernity*, edited by Dennis Washburn and Kevin Reinhart (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 409-433. Crypto-religion also suggests that although a community may claim to have converted to say, Christianity, in reality their primary religious identification is with their traditional beliefs, even though they are displaying their converted faith externally. For survival reasons or methods of resistance, the crypto-religious community may simply be playing along with this new religion of which they never really accepted. This way of analyzing syncretism operates on the assumption that while the converted are involved with and are able to stay in dialogue with Christian missionaries to the extent they have or want to, they have managed to preserve their traditional religious consciousness largely intact. This is common pragmatic method among Christian and Jewish communities being coerced to convert to another religion under duress. See for example, Thomas Burkman, "The Urakami Incidents and the Struggle for Religious Toleration in Early Meiji Japan," in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1, no.2/3 (1974): 143-216; Andrew Wingate, "The Secret Christians of Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu: One Pattern of Conversion in a South Indian Town," in *Religion and Society* 33, no.1 (1986): 73-87; Christal Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: The Sacred Book of Japan's Hidden Christians* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996); Renée Levine Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters of Israel? The Crypto-Jewish Women of Castille* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Janet Jacobs Liebman, *Hidden Heritage: The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Renée Levine Melammed, *A Question of Identity: Iberian Conversos in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Gloria Golden, Andrea Alessandra Cabello, and Sohaib Raihan, eds., *Remnants of Crypto-Jews among Hispanic Americans* (Mountain View: Floricanto Press, 2005); Laura Jenkins, "True Believers? Agency and Sincerity in Representations of "Mass Movement" Converts in 1930s India," in *Converting Cultures*, edited by Washburn, and Reinhart, 435-464; and Timothy Dobe, "Flaunting the Secret: Lineage Tales of Christian Sannyasis and Missionaries," in *History of Religions* 49, no.3 (2010): 254-299.

⁴²³ Although Foucault's idea of resistance is not clearly expressed in his earlier "archeological" phase, the subsequent development of "genealogies" in Foucauldian thought sheds more light on discursive systems of domination as he shifts his focus to the more political question of power. The publication of *Discipline and Punish* in 1969 marks Foucault's shift from "archeological" period to the "genealogical" period. While Foucault's archeological method focuses on systems of thought and knowledge which are governed by rules that operate at an unconscious level. Archaeology is about examining the historical discursive traces in order to write a "history of the present." In contrast, the genealogical method takes its

and especially Foucault. In particular, he is influenced by Foucault's idea of power as more than a coercive or repressive force that wills people to do things against their wishes; power can be a productive and resistive force.⁴²⁴ Bhabha's argument on hybridity's creative possibilities for resistance within deeply embedded power structures is informed by Foucault's insistence that there is always a possibility of reversal and subversion within power structures. What is compelling about Bhabha's argument is the idea that the marginalized can act subversively in spite of the oppressor's dominance. The negotiated aspect of the encounter, even in the face of unfavorable odds, is what allows for agency among the marginalized. As Bhabha notes, "forms of popular rebellion and mobilization are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through... cultural practices."⁴²⁵ For Bhabha, the condition of hybridity has become an occasion for marginalized groups to "mess around" and resist essentializing and hegemonic discourses of purity. Bhabha's assertion of hybridity as a creative source of agency and resistance

influence from Nietzsche and functions more as an interrogation of the production of knowledge as sustained by systems of power which. It is a method that attempts to reconstruct the origins and development of discourses by showing their rootedness in a field of power. See Hubert Dreyfus, and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), especially Chapters four and five for a detailed examination on Foucault's methodological shift. See also Roger Paden, "Locating Foucault: Archeology vs. Structuralism," in *Philosophy Social Criticism* 11, no.19 (1986): 19-37; Michael Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power, and the Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); and C.G. Prado, *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

⁴²⁴ For a thorough exploration of Foucauldian thought on power and resistance, see Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); and "Powers and Strategies," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 134-145.

⁴²⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 20.

against oppression has not only opened up fruitful discussions on the instability of dominant structures, but also on strategies of resistance in least expected spaces.⁴²⁶

Since all cultures and religions possess composite origins and individuals and communities continually reconstitute them, Bhabha argues that the very presence of the Native (Other) creates a disruptive space against colonial discourse. For example, Bhabha describes a nineteenth century account of a native Indian Christian's missionary efforts to convert a local village in Delhi. As a mode of resistance, he points out the villagers' performative agency by refusing communion administered by a vegetarian, insisting instead that a meat-eater should serve them communion.⁴²⁷ Bhabha sees this as an instance of "spectacular resistance." Yet, as I discovered in my fieldwork, Metro Church members' commitment to the Christian faith is unflinching. They take their faith seriously and they make every effort to follow their Christian commitments as closely as possible. There is no reason for me to doubt the authenticity of my informants' religious convictions. While I do not dismiss the fact that their convictions may be construed as "performance," this may not be a sufficient explanation. We need to further explore the social field and context of Metro Church members, how this field structures and privileges certain behaviors, and how they optimize access to capital.

As I indicated in Chapter One, not everyone agrees with Bhabha's positive assertion of hybridity as a site of resistance. Apart from the critiques of excessive emphases on textual deconstruction, abstract theorizing and disengagement with the real

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 218.

⁴²⁷ A full description of this account can be found in Bhabha's chapter, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," in *The Location Culture*, 145-174.

world, I stress that hybridity cannot account for the situated and complex narratives of the Chinese members of Metro Church. I want to pay more attention to the intricate network of power relations that exist within marginalized groups. For the Chinese members of Metro Church, they are constantly negotiating their Chineseness and “Christian-ness.” Thus, there are many intersecting and competing fields in which Metro Church members belong. In the struggle to gain access to capital, church members privilege their Christian identity, consciously and unconsciously, over their Chinese ethnic identity.

It might appear that Bourdieu is restricting agency within the confines of *habitus*. This is not the case; Bourdieu believes that *habitus*, as “systems of transposable dispositions,” is not a static and unchanging structure that governs social behavior. He is not, after all, a structuralist. Therefore, instances of resistance do manifest themselves. Yet, while Bourdieu allows space for resistance, the agential capacity of the social actor is directed towards adjustments to the field, and the leverage is largely determined by the shape of the existing field. As Bourdieu states, “[agents] can succeed only to the extent that... they manage to reactivate dispositions which previous processes of inculcation have deposited in people’s bodies.”⁴²⁸ In other words, to radically alter the field is tantamount to “social death.” So, resistance may be present in hybridity, but it is done within the confines of *habitus*. This presents a more accurate picture of the Chinese members of Metro Church position, rather than the nebulous “free for all” form of

⁴²⁸ Bourdieu is careful not to deny agency and independence of social agents. Underneath the seemingly pessimistic and deterministic rhetoric lies the potential for resistance. It is difficult task since it involves uncovering the layers upon layers of structures embedded within our lives that unconsciously conforms us into the social order that continues to oppress and exclude others with less capital and occupying fields that are not considered to be beneficial. For more information, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), especially “Chapter 6: Social Being, Time and the Sense of Existence,” 206-245.

resistance that Bhabha advocates. Nevertheless, the unconscious privileging of their Christian identity, this unequal belonging, is what creates symbolic violence toward the non-Christian Chinese. Hybridity becomes a blanketing statement that does not fully examine the complex, inter-twining, *and* unconscious jockeying for positions within the field of cultural production. Indeed, the westernized-English-speaking Chinese Christians are socially and culturally higher than non-English-speaking, and non-Christian. Metro Church members perceive non-Christians Chinese as backward and superstitious people. Thus, it is not always the case that syncretism and hybridity lead to subversion or towards a more respectful, open, and tolerant community.

Unequal belonging reminds us that we must continue to be vigilant against romanticized notions of resistance and agency. As such, I propose a more “balanced” approach by paying credence to both simultaneous empowerment and oppression among marginalized communities. Julie Ingersoll is careful to point out the univocality of such studies of empowerment. She argues that univocality “not only marginalizes alternative views, but... also masks important aspects of religious phenomena. It has had the paradoxical effect of silencing the feminist women within these traditions.”⁴²⁹ Unequal belonging demonstrates how we need to pay attention to the different modalities of actions that marginalized groups such as Chinese members of Metro Church could enact.

In Robert Orsi’s *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes*, he argues that Catholic devotional culture has served to hurt women as conspirators against themselves. For the women who devoted themselves to St. Jude, the

⁴²⁹ Julie Ingersoll, “Against Univocality: Re-reading Ethnographies of Conservative Women,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography or Religion*, edited by James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 164.

saint empowered the women to take action for themselves and “moved from being the victim of circumstances to the narrator of them.”⁴³⁰ Nevertheless, Orsi also contends that this leaves gender roles unchallenged. He sums up women’s status in a patriarchal world in a poignant statement: “Devotionalism was made for and against women.”⁴³¹ It is precisely Orsi’s unwillingness to objectify women either as pawns/victims of the male Catholic hierarchy or as fully agential individuals utilizing the cult of St. Jude to liberate themselves that I draw my influence; it is this tension that I want to highlight. The univocality of Bhabha and other postcolonial scholars’ claims of empowerment and resistance within hybrid identities can serve to mask power and privilege of the marginalized Chinese in Malaysia.

Indeed, syncretism and hybridity do not necessarily lead to subversion or towards a more open, respectful, and tolerant community. For example, while Peter van der Veer agrees that syncretism is a “useless term” as a descriptive project, he cautions against the romanticism associated with syncretism as a solution to sectarianism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and religious intolerance.⁴³² He wonders if syncretism truly offers a global possibility for the merging of religious difference, or if syncretism functions as a code word for the incorporation and assimilation of “minority” cultures into the culture of the dominant group. Van der Veer examines Hindu-Muslim syncretism in India by citing the example of Hindu reverence of a Sufi tomb. He argues that concepts such as “tolerance” and “harmony” do not figure at all with Hindu and Muslim worshippers. Rather, they are

⁴³⁰ Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude*, 136.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴³² Peter van der Veer, “Syncretism, Multiculturalism and the Discourse of Tolerance, in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, 209.

more concerned with issues of orthodoxy and “right belief.”⁴³³ It remains to be seen if minority Muslims are comfortable with Hindus incorporating their religious traditions into the majority whole. From van der Veer’s example, it is not clear if syncretism would necessarily lead to respect and communal harmony.⁴³⁴

Birgitta Frello argues that scholars should be more concerned with analyzing rather than describing “transgression concepts,” such as hybridity, in order to “open up new fields and new possibilities for critique.”⁴³⁵ It is one thing to make descriptive claims about hybrid identities, but it is another thing to examine its utility and effectiveness in resisting structures of oppression. As Ella Shohat reminds us in “Notes on the Postcolonial,” hybridity must be examined in a non-universalizing manner. It has to be contextualized; scholars must question “who is mobilizing what in the articulation of the past, deploying what identities, identifications, and representations, and in the name of what political visions and goals.”⁴³⁶ In short, hybridity fails to capture the complexity of identity formation on a contextual level. For Anne McClintock, the question of displacing authority through hybridity:

⁴³³ Ibid., 205.

⁴³⁴ van der Veer is pointing out the difference between hybridity “from above” and hybridity “from below.” By this, he means the type of hybridity deployed by those in positions of power (hybridity from above) and the type of hybridity that is not deployed by regimes of power (hybridity from below). Ien Ang has also discussed this point with specific reference to the Australian context in *On Not Speaking Chinese*, especially “Chapter 12: Conclusion: Together-in-difference (The Uses and Abuses of Hybridity),” 193-201. Although this begins to complexify and nuance hybridity, I contend that not everybody from the margins benefit from the deployment of hybrid identities. With unequal belonging, I show how certain marginalized communities are better off than others.

⁴³⁵ Brigitta Frello, “Essentialism, Hybridism, and Cultural Critique,” <http://culturalstudiesresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/FrelloEssentialism.pdf> (accessed June 2, 2010).

⁴³⁶ Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 245.

entails interrogating more than the ambivalences of form; it also entails interrogating the messy imprecisions of history, the embattled negotiations and strategies of the disempowered, the militarization of masculinity, the elision of women from political and economic power, the decisive foreclosures of ethnic violence and so on. Ambivalence may well be a critical aspect of subversion, but it is not a sufficient agent of colonial failure.⁴³⁷

While I commend the possibilities of opening up new spaces for creating agency and resistance among marginalized communities, my analysis reveals that Metro Church members are engaged in unequal belonging, rejecting certain identity markers while privileging others.⁴³⁸ Thus, we can further nuance hybridity by incorporating Bourdieu's approach towards power and resistance. Bourdieu provides better theoretical grounding for my analysis of the unequal belonging among Chinese Pentecostals in Malaysia, an analysis that adds to and compliments Bhabha's theory of hybridity.

Bourdieu's theoretical principles are not an untroubled declaration of how the presence of hybrid identities alone would necessarily elicit a situation of resistance and liberation. Indeed, Bourdieu reminds us to be more attentive to the lived conditions of people on the ground. Because there are instances of unequal belonging in the identities of Metro Church members, we need to be careful with our wholesale adoption of hybridity as the answer to oppression and enforced identities. In relation to postcolonial studies, there needs to be greater care in examining how marginalized communities can

⁴³⁷ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 66-67.

⁴³⁸ Elsewhere, Charles Stewart attempts to debunk the assumption that creolization is singularly a process of cultural mixture that gives rise to a new category of creative agents. With specific reference to diasporic Greeks, Stewart's study reveals a troubled dimension of creolization in the community. He argues that the Greeks who have earlier migrated to the United States to escape the Ottoman Empire have implicitly "othered" the newer diasporic community who are not linguistically and culturally competent according to homeland models and standards. Greek-Americans claim that they changed little since migrating to the United States, if at all, and thus present themselves as the bearers of true Hellenism. For more information, see Charles Stewart, "Forget Homi! Creolization, *Omogéneia* and the Greek Diaspora," in *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 15, no.1 (2006): 61-88.

potentially recapitulate oppressive structures on other marginalized groups and within their own communities.

Conclusion

Despite contemporary efforts to analyze and complexify the nature of hybrid identities, postcolonial scholars tend to assume the existence of an antagonistic relationship between the powerful and the marginalized. In addition, postcolonialism's muddiness and obtuse prose is often divorced from the local political and social terrain. The history of colonialism in Malaysia plays a pivotal role in the reification of ethnic and religious identities. As I have demonstrated in Chapter Two, the British colonial administration in the late 1800s and early 1900s constructed and reified the ethnic and religious categories in Malaysia. The Chinese who migrated to the country became associated with images of greedy foreign invaders. This image continues to manifest itself in contemporary Malaysia along rigid ethnic and religious boundaries. Based on this observation, the Chinese Christian community in Malaysia is doubly oppressed. For the members of Metro Church, they construct fluid and hybrid ethnic and religious identities as a strategy to resist these essentialized categories. Their very presence disrupts bounded notions of culture, religion, and ethnicity.

While hybridity, as a useful analytical concept, begins to describe the construction of Chinese identities in Malaysia, it fails to pay attention to the web of inter-connectivity and unequal belonging not just between the powerful and the marginalized, but also within the marginalized community. Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, field, and capital are helpful tools to analyze Chinese Pentecostals as they negotiate their identities as Chinese,

Christian, and Malaysian. Because Metro Church's congregants are disproportionately from the urban, middle to upper class sector (i.e. westernized) of the Malaysian Chinese population, these identities may not necessarily act as sites of resistance. To this end, this chapter argued that unequal belonging highlights that hybridity, although a useful and helpful term, fails to capture the layered and horizontal workings of privilege and power that are inherent within marginalized groups.

This chapter also demonstrated that Metro Church members are engaged in unequal belonging, privileging one marker of their identity over another. It is unequal because not all Chinese Malaysians are the same: some have "higher" status than others. By constructing an identity that privileges a western-oriented Christianity, this move constitutes an important strategy in the struggle against Chinese peoples' precarious position in Malaysia. Yet, it also creates a situation of unequal belonging in which urban Chinese Christians hold power and influence over the non-Christian Chinese who have limited access to capital.

Hybridity, as an analytical concept, points out sites of intense contestation and tension, while illustrating that the struggle over its meaning and utility has wide-ranging cultural, economic, and political implications. It is this tension that I have tried to demonstrate in this dissertation. It is this tension that is at play in the construction of identities within the Chinese members of Metro Church in Malaysia. Ultimately, this project proves that we must continue to probe and nuance hybridity's power to undermine structures of authority and dominance.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere. If it is fluid, how can we understand the ways in which self-understandings may harden, congeal, and crystallize? If it is constructed, how can we understand the sometimes coercive force of external identifications? If it is multiple, how do we understand the terrible singularity that is often striven for – and sometimes realized – by politicians seeking to transform mere categories into unitary and exclusive groups? How can we understand the power and pathos of identity politics?

— Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*.⁴³⁹

Brubaker's insights on the issues surrounding identity formation deserve to be taken seriously. In my own research context, I observed and analyzed the highly complex formation of identities among Metro Church members. As I interacted with my research participants in this specific context, I noticed how they live their lives in tension with multiple aspects of their identity such as their religious commitments, ethnic demarcations, and place in Malaysian society. Church members are constantly negotiating different and competing loyalties and allegiances. These intersecting loyalties led me develop my concept of unequal belonging which questions how hybridity may or may not function as a site of resistance.

Postcolonial scholars, especially Bhabha, posit that cultural borrowing and interpenetration are part of the very nature of cultures. As such, identities – be they

⁴³⁹ Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 29.

national, ethnic, or religious – are fraught with instabilities in the face of the globalized world. Static and fixed grounding in identities is not neutral but possesses the power to exclude other groups that do not “fit in.” For Bhabha, hybridity’s displacement and mixture gives rise to a “Third Space” from which one can detect, critique and reject colonialism’s failed project of promoting purity and polarity.⁴⁴⁰ Hybridity is a strategy for disrupting exclusionary and oppressive notions of a pure identity among marginalized/minority communities. I challenged this notion by introducing the idea of unequal belonging where hybridity may not always be a site of resistance.

In Malaysia, the ruling government’s ongoing policies that essentialize race and religion to contain conflicts between the dominant Malays and the Chinese and Indian minorities have created rigid ethnic and religious demarcation. Hybridity should be celebrated and deployed against structures of oppression. Yet, I have argued that hybridity, while an exceptionally useful category, also fails to address issues of unequal power relations. To this end, I utilized Bourdieu’s sociological lens to nuance hybridity as a theoretical framework.

The specter of colonialism continues to haunt contemporary Malaysians. I examined how the colonial vision of “race” manifested in the institutional structures of Malaysian colonial society. I utilized Bourdieu as a framework to assess the effects of the legacy of British colonialism on Chinese and Malay relations in Malaysia today. These ethnic groups, having internalized these colonial schemes formed a *habitus* which structured the social practices/policies that continue to construct the Chinese minority along essentialized categories are more than just unscrupulous traders and opportunistic

⁴⁴⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 37.

foreigners, I showed how early Chinese immigrants played an important role in the assisting the Malay rulers in managing the trading affairs of the port-state. The Chinese also created hybrid communities by inter-mingling and marrying local women.

Of course, there were ethnic tensions that pre-date British arrival in Malaysia. However, the arrival of the British exacerbated the country's ethnic tensions and drastically altered the socio-economic and ethnic landscape of the country. Although Malaysia's plural and multi-cultural society was largely a byproduct of British colonial policy, this policy also reified strict ethnic boundaries that have contributed to the marginalization of non-Malays in Malaysia to this day. Bolstered by nineteenth century theories of racial superiority, these policies became the discursive framework in which the colonization of Malaysia took place. The British discouraged the Malays from participating in economic and social activities of colonial Malaysia, because they were deemed to be too docile and "lazy" to engage in the colonial economy. The colonial government also implemented the "divide and rule" policy which prevented other ethnic groups from integrating and forming real communities. Thus, the Chinese became "othered" and stereotyped as invaders and ungrateful money grubbers; the Malays resented how the Chinese were siphoning the country's resources that they believed were rightfully theirs.

The *habitus* of the colonial experience is not explicitly stated, but self-evident within the "givens" of the social milieu. These "givens" continue to manifest themselves in post-independent Malaysia. The trope of the greedy and ungrateful foreign Chinese continues to resurface whenever there are any rumblings of protest and critiques against

the ruling pro-Malay BN government. Most importantly, racial and ethnic boundaries are strictly reinforced.

I stressed that the Chinese community is a heterogeneous group by exploring the idea of Chineseness through fieldwork at Metro Church, a Chinese-majority Pentecostal Church in Kuala Lumpur. Identity formation is a complex process that simultaneously incorporates individual agency, group dynamics, and societal impositions. Further, identity formation is a lifelong endeavor that includes the discovery, recovery and appropriation of old, forgotten and new identities. This case study shows the Chinese in Malaysia have different ways of conceptualizing their own Chineseness. Being urban dwellers, most members of Metro Church qualified their view of what it meant to be Chinese. Through my interviews, two categories began to emerge: the “Chinese” Chinese and the “Modern” Chinese.

Malaysian Chinese ethnic identities are simultaneously constructed and flexible. They also display attachments to static concepts. Chinese ethnic identities are constantly shifting and fraught with tensions in maintaining both primordial and constructive elements of their identities. Imagining identity as a process would mitigate between “structure versus agency” dichotomies. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* offers a more complex analysis of the context which compliments postcolonial scholarship on identity. Metro Church members, informed by the *habitus*, are able to maintain primordial attachments of their Chinese identities, while at the same time maintaining a constructivist aspect of their Chineseness. As a historical byproduct of complex mixing of socio-economic and cultural adaptations, primordial cultural patterns continue to manifest and exert influence on the structures imposed in their lives. While this might

sound deterministic, Bourdieu believes that circumstances may alter these patterns and social agents can strategically maneuver within the *habitus* to maximize their potential to “get ahead” in the game. As a result, they constructed what I call a Modern Chinese identity. My analysis of the interviews reveals an example of unequal belonging where the Modern Chinese disparages the Chinese Chinese group as “lacking – the Chinese Chinese stand in opposition with Modern Chinese identity. Nevertheless, the most basic understandings of the “rules of the game” do not change easily because they are reinforced through the institutional structures and social practices of their lives.

This project also challenged conventional views of the role of Christianity in a postcolonial context. To be a Chinese and Christian in Malaysia is to experience multiple minority statuses. Politically and ethnically, the Chinese are a minority group in the country, while being Christian also makes them a religious minority. Among postcolonial studies, scholars interpret Christianity as colonial enterprise that continues to displace indigenous cosmologies in a hegemonic manner. While I agree with that Christianity can be hegemonic and could function as a vehicle for the “colonization of the mind” among converts, I argued that conceptualizing Christianity as a tool of colonization or as an instrument for liberation is inadequate. I stressed how Christianity serves as a vehicle for socializing members into adopting certain orientations and practices in relation to their surroundings. For the members of Metro Church, being a Chinese and Christian form complex relationships involving religion, culture, and ethnicity.

Among Chinese Christians in Malaysia, the church becomes a site for the production of, accumulation of, and access to cultural capital. Specifically, conversion to Christianity re-orientates their Chinese identities and empowering them with access to

cultural capital which helps counter the reified form of Chinese identity in Malaysia. Through Christianity, they gain status through knowledge in English language and western ideals. Yet, I do not mean this to be simply a matter of amassing power in terms of the optimization of access to resources. This cultural capital functions ambiguously – it is limited and unequal. Not everybody in the Chinese community could access this capital, especially those Chinese who are not fluent in English or westernized.

The conventional focus on hybridity as a site of resistance and liberation, made famous by Bhabha, and popularized among postcolonial scholars, cultural theorists, and theologians misses the point in examining how and *why* certain hybridities are privileged and ordered. Hybrid identities constructed by the Pentecostal Chinese community in Malaysia are simultaneously oppressed and oppressing. They are engaging in what I call “unequal belonging,” that is, the privileging of certain markers of identity over another. This is most evident with church members’ views on syncretism – the practice of blending and mixing different religious and cultural attributes.

Postcolonial studies have a penchant for diagnosing the ways in which oppression and marginalization occur either directly or indirectly. In so doing, the discipline has dedicated itself to developing theories dedicated to uncovering spaces where resistance could take place. However, through Bourdieu’s categories of *habitus*, field, and capital, I hope that I have shown how dominance could covertly (or overtly) mask itself through fluid and dynamic constructions of hybrid identities. We need to locate some of the more subtle workings of power and hegemony entrenched even among marginalized communities. By closely examining the practitioners of these identities on the ground, I

hope that this dissertation had achieved the task of exposing the limits of the discourse of hybridity.

Further Research Recommendation: Searching for the “So What?”

When I first began this project, I sought to learn how members of a Chinese-majority Pentecostal Church in Malaysia understood their identities as simultaneously Chinese and Christian. Moreover, I wanted to explore how these identity constructions have the potential to resist the institutions of power in Malaysia that has systematically tried to marginalize them. Although this dissertation uses a specific theory to argue for unequal belonging within hybrid identities, the analysis provided in this project also points to new avenues of inquiry and raises further questions.

The focus on a specific community and their everyday lived reality provided me with insights which could complement postcolonial discourse and religious studies. In particular, Metro Church members’ narratives offer illuminating perspectives on the researcher’s position vis-à-vis his/her research participants. In addition, my research points toward the question and importance of “divine presence.” Because my research participants continually invoked God and God’s active role in structuring their identities, we ought to take these narratives seriously instead of dismissing them as something that is beyond the purview of the researcher.

Becoming the Critic and Caretaker

My home city, Kuala Lumpur, is undergoing massive transformation; new structures are erected with each passing day; roads change and new elevated highways

appear seemingly out of thin air. Historic and state of the art buildings stand side-by-side in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, creating an atmosphere that is simultaneously chaotic and congested. The city represents the old, the new, and those in between in full display. For Malaysians, this is nothing new. The city is congested, chaotic, and messy. The hustle and bustle of life and the smorgasbord of new and old are the things of daily occurrence. The last description, “messy,” is especially poignant for me as I conclude this dissertation project. Old and new are not easily demarcated in Kuala Lumpur. They are thrust into the situation as old and new seamlessly bleed into one another. As a researcher conducting fieldwork in his own backyard, I am retelling this story because it perfectly captures the highly complex and debated issue of “insider” versus “outsider.”

When we address the insider/outsider question, we have to ask, what is our task as religious scholars? On one side of the debate, we have scholars such as Russell McCutcheon who argue that the religious scholar’s chief concern is to expose the discursive battlefield taking place within the academic study of religion. Indeed, religious scholars are to be critics – analyzing and developing theories that are sound – rather than painstakingly detailing and describing the inner workings of a religious community, characterized as the caretaker.⁴⁴¹ Hence, the scholar, who is the outsider, provides the most unbiased look at religion.

While this dissertation falls under the “critic” side of the debate, I fall in between insider and outsider. As much as I believe in the importance of uncovering power structures in the construction of religious identities, I cannot ignore the so-called

⁴⁴¹ Russell McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 137.

mysteries, essences, and private experiences of religion and the people on the ground that experience them. If all we do as scholars is to analyze the workings of power, how then do we begin to reconcile the stories we have gathered from our research participants whose experience with their gods and rituals are as real and immanent? In my own research context, how do I account for Charismatic Chinese Christians speaking in tongues, or retelling miraculous stories where God appeared to them and healed their ailments, or delivered them from a potential tragedy?

The Question of “Divine Presence”

Along the same vein, Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity is a religion that focuses on the indwelling of the Spirit, spontaneous miracles and healings which fall outside the range of the natural world. Yet, members of Metro Church take this as a very natural thing. God plays a significant role in the lives of Metro Church. I saw this every weekend at church while I was conducting fieldwork. People spoke in tongues, they were slain in the Spirit, and they asked God to heal their sickness. They also asked God to help them in the everyday activities that many would consider mundane, or even silly. It is not uncommon to hear, for instance, stories where church members ask God to clear the snarling traffic jam in Kuala Lumpur so that they could be at work in time. Although I acknowledge that this project did not pay much attention to the workings of the divine in church members' lives, when God becomes vividly and tangibly present in their narratives, the divine necessarily needs to be taken seriously in the way church members construct their identities.

However, metaphysical beings are beyond the purview of scientific and critical inquiry. How then, do we begin to provide justifications and explanations incorporate this very important feature in their lives in the discourse of identity? How do we take this tangible reality of Metro Church members' lives our analysis of identity formation? What categories or interpretative lenses are available for us to analyze this phenomenon beyond tried and true modern analytical tools? While I think social, political, and economic explanations of peoples' religious lives still have a lot of value, can we go beyond these analyses? Better still, can we put "God" into these discourses?

Divine beings, spiritual ecstasies, and stories of miracles are central to the religious lives of Metro Church members. Within the context of Catholic Marian devotional practices Robert Orsi argues in his essay, "Abundant History," that divine presence need not be swept under the rug of modernity, as if this is something archaic or delusional. Orsi further argues that these "abundant events" "requires a history of its own, and experiences and practices of presence suggest the lineaments of that history."⁴⁴²

I believe Orsi's model of "abundant history" could provide new models in analyzing identity construction that incorporates stories of the divine into the lives of the people in my research context. I see Orsi's abundant events as an "opening" of analysis. Through this opening, researchers can begin to ask hard questions such as, how do we account for the God and/or Spirit that many of my informants tell me is present in their lives, walking with them, and influencing the way they think about their identities? If identities are relational, are they in relationship with divine beings?

⁴⁴² Robert Orsi, "Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity," in *Historically Speaking* 9, no.7 (2008): 16.

Orsi could provide the study of the Pentecostal experience with a different analytical lens. When Orsi mentions God irrupting into time, I see this as the introduction of an unstable element into our stable analytical tools. The nature of ethnographic fieldwork is that the researcher is bound by the whims and impulses of his/her research participants. We can never be sure where the research would lead us to find. It is for this reason that I find ethnographic research to be stimulating, even “dangerous” to a certain extent. It is dangerous because it forces me, the researcher, to go places that I do not want to go. It is the organic nature of ethnographic research that challenges the scholars to be open to different and uncomfortable study results. When people talk about God entering their lives, we have to consider that people’s lives and identities are not just about oppression, liberation, survival, or resistance. Most of all, it allows our research to be honest while honoring our informant’s narratives.

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