

Thesis
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**A Question of “Chineseness”: The Chinese Diaspora
in Singapore 1819-1950s.**

by

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A thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Stirling

2001

~~05/01~~

Acknowledgements

My gratitude to Dr. Sudesh Mishra, for being my harshest critic, a good friend, and a supervisor who made me think about my argument from new perspectives and who questioned my every word and phrase. To Dr. James Procter, my second supervisor, I am grateful for his critical insights in the revision of chapters, and to Prof. Angela Smith, for being a mentor and always generous with her time. My gratitude to both for their support throughout the three years, especially during the process of upgrading. My thanks also to Prof. Robert Hewison, for his faith in my work from the very beginning, and to Dr. Philip Holden, for being so generous with his ideas and materials. I am grateful to the department of English Studies, for providing the scholarship and a stimulating intellectual environment.

To my valued friends, who encouraged me in my aspirations, among others, Maggie, Susana, Julie, Juliet, Kerry, Seema, Shadow, Marjorie, Shanti, everyone at D21, the congregation of Queen St. Methodist church, and especially to Chit, whose boundless e-mails sustained me through difficult times.

I am indebted to my family, for reminding me that there are more important things in life than a PhD. This thesis would not have been possible without them. My gratitude to Peng Tze, my husband, for his unconditional love, patience, support, and for selflessly bearing with my explosions that result from the frustrations of writing. To my family in Singapore, England, and Ipoh: the Angs, Hos, Minjoots, Larsens, Cheongs, Tohs, and especially to mummy in London, for being always a phone call away. I owe a debt of gratitude to my parents, for making my education in UK a reality in the first place. Finally, to mama, my grandmother, to whom I owe the most. I am grateful to her for being a role model in her own strength and character, for providing the language from which I now speak and write, and for instilling in me the values, beliefs, and faith that make me the person I am today. This thesis is dedicated to her.

Abstract

This thesis is a study of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore from 1819 to the 1950s. It begins by situating the diasporic subject in a historical context, highlighting some of the key moments in the diaspora's development, such as the advent of colonialism during the nineteenth century, and the formation of an ethnic enclave in the settlement. The discussion then calls into question the construction of the Chinese subject in colonial discourses, and interrogates the ways in which the diasporic population was constituted within the framework of colonialism.

The main purpose has been to examine how the diaspora in Singapore has evolved, and to explore the adequacies, or inadequacies, of existing diasporic theories in the ways they relate to the Chinese experience. This is achieved by recapitulating the theoretical implications of existing diaspora frameworks, and questioning the tensions and limitations generated by such discourses. Simultaneously, this study takes into consideration the construction of a "Chinese identity", and does so by presenting possible ways of conceptualising what it means to be "Chinese" for subjects of the diaspora.

In discussing the extent to which the subject's sense of "self" and belonging has been shaped by its immigrant past, this research draws on and studies the writings, both literary and non-literary, that have emerged from the community. A central concern in all this is the identity and subjectivity of the diasporic subject, and the point here is that not every subject experiences diaspora in the same way, but that these alterities are important in the constitution and formation of a Chinese identity. As I note in the introduction, the issue of what it means to be Chinese, and indeed, the issue of home and belonging, is one that is always contested for people in the diasporic community, and the aim of this thesis has been to continually deconstruct the idea of a "single" Chinese diaspora, and to expose it as a heterogeneous, fragmented, and internally differentiated construction.

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Introduction

This study provides an innovative framework for exploring the Chinese diaspora in Singapore. There have been significant accounts of these people from different historical, sociological, and anthropological perspectives, as presented in the works of C.M. Turnbull, Felix Chia, K.G. Tregonning, Yen Ching Hwang, Tu Weiming, and Wang Gungwu, but there have been few attempts to juxtapose and examine these findings in relation to current theories of diaspora and to existing critical essays and literary writings that have emerged from the community. Thus, while this research is grounded in the works of historians, sinologists, and sociologists, it goes beyond these boundaries by integrating and drawing on both literary and non-literary texts, theoretical material, and empirical research. It contextualises some of the central debates within Diaspora Studies and poses critical questions about the ways in which the Chinese people and their identities have been constituted and contested. What emerges, then, is an eclectic exposition of the Chinese in Singapore, offering fresh and novel insights into the community.

Simultaneously, this thesis analyses how the diaspora relates to the question of “Chineseness”, that is to say, the question of what it means to be “Chinese”, and foregrounds the works of writers, researchers, and scholars of both the nineteenth and twentieth century, who deal with the early diaspora. Migration and the dispersion of the Chinese people to Singapore provide an important background to what it has meant for them to live abroad, in the world outside China. The meaning of being Chinese, or the concept of a Chinese identity, is relative and varies from individual to

individual. The question of “Chineseness”, as this thesis demonstrates, is also constructed from outside the diaspora, through external pressures and perceptions, and the diaspora’s reaction to them. Being Chinese, for example, can suggest an identification with China, where the notion of identity is intertwined with China as a geopolitical concept. This notion of “Chineseness” is immutably tied to a fixed terrain, and based on a conception of identity as inseparable from place. On the other hand, being Chinese can also entail the participation, wherever possible, of the reproduction of Chinese ways and values, and the transmission of these traditions to the next generation.¹ This notion of identity is based on a cultural, rather than a geopolitical concept, where the formation of ethnicity is tied to the practice and maintenance of cultural features usually attributed to the Chinese.²

The examples delineated above occasion a need to recognise and explore the diversity of Chinese identities, and their implications for subjects of the diaspora. They are significant for describing how the sense of being Chinese can take on varied meanings for different individuals, giving rise to different attitudes as to what it means to be Chinese. What this thesis aims to unravel then, are the possibilities and problems of thinking about “Chineseness”. It attempts to examine how the diasporic people conceptualise their own sense of ethnicity, where the meanings of identity, “home” and belonging, are constantly being (re)constructed and (re)negotiated within different discourses, and in different temporalities.

¹ Wang Gungwu, ‘Among Non-Chinese’ in Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *The Living Tree. The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p.128.

² ‘Cultural features’ here refers to everyday practices related, for instance, to food, language, dress, and customs.

This research deals specifically with the diaspora of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the choice of period on which it is based is deliberate. The years 1819 to the 1950s, an era which I refer to as the “early diaspora”, witnessed the proliferation of Chinese immigrants to the settlement of Singapore. In 1819, Singapore was established as a British colony and trading settlement. Consequently, this led to an increase of Chinese emigrants to the diaspora. Although migration of the Chinese was thought to have begun from as early as the fifteenth century, it was the emergence of colonialism that precipitated their arrival in significantly large numbers. During this period, the policies of the colonial government in terms of the social and political administration of the colony also served to sustain the growth of the diaspora. For example, the social restructuring of the settlement according to a capitalist logic that placed surplus value as a determinant, and the practice of indentured labour, that is, a system of contract labour that employed predominantly Chinese workers, helped to enhance the economic position of the colony, and thereby augment the diaspora’s population. Against this background, it is necessary for the early diaspora to be analysed in its historical context, in order for it to be differentiated from any other diasporic groups.³ The factors that encouraged this migration will be elaborated in later chapters. What seems clear is that the population of Chinese immigrants to Singapore increased steadily from 1819 onwards; a growth that continued until the 1950s, when the migration of Chinese to the region came to a gradual end.

The thesis is divided thematically into four chapters. The first chapter is devoted to a historical interpretation of the early diaspora. The word ‘diaspora’

³ I use the term ‘diasporic’ here, and as it occurs throughout the thesis, as an adjective to describe the condition of the diaspora in its most basic sense, as the scattering of a people from their native land.

embodies the notion of migration and journey, and the movement of the diasporic Chinese must be historicised if the concept of a “Chinese diaspora” is to be further explored. The second chapter entails a theoretical examination of the diasporic community, while the third and fourth chapters explore selected literary and non-literary texts about the Chinese subjects.

Chapter One begins by foregrounding and outlining the diaspora as an enclave within British Malaya. It goes on to define, at the outset, the diaspora as a community that is divided within itself and is comprised of different Chinese identities. The discussion then traces the origins of the diaspora and its growth in the settlement of Singapore. The question regarding the formation of diasporas, as Avtar Brah suggests, ‘is not simply about *who travels* but *when, how, and under what circumstances?*’⁴ What this first chapter aims to do, therefore, is to examine from a historical and sociological perspective the dispersion of the Chinese people to the settlement. Often, the causes of migration are discussed in literature in terms of “push” and “pull” factors, and writers such as Wang Gungwu, Lynn Pan, and Robin Cohen, have all drawn on this framework.

A varied set of factors have contributed to the growth of the Chinese diasporic community. Many migrants left their homeland by force of circumstance resulting from natural and political disasters. There were also others who saw migration as a desirable option, and left their natal territory for economic reasons. Political and social factors “pushed” the relocation of the majority of Chinese immigrants, and many of them believed that the opportunities available abroad were less limited or declining than

those at home. If the reasons for the Chinese leaving their homeland are important, so are those of their arrival and settlement in the diaspora. The extension of British rule in Singapore from 1819 until the 1950s stimulated commerce in the colony, where improved economic and social conditions “pulled” many emigrants toward the host country. Employment opportunities that came about as a result of colonial expansion also provided the impetus for migration. When and why the Chinese migrated are important factors that highlight the conditions under which they left China and were received in the settlement. These conditions also helped to shape the diasporic community that was subsequently established in nineteenth century Singapore, and the community that descendants of the diaspora would have in the country. It is this historical context that will provide the overall framework within which this thesis is written.

Alongside an examination of the history of Chinese immigration to Singapore, Chapter One also includes a discussion of the impact of British colonialism on the diaspora. The chapter interrogates colonial writings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the diasporic Chinese, and examines how this community was constructed in different discourses, policies, and practices brought about by the colonial government. Many of the colonial narratives reduced the early diaspora to a few adjectives as they emphasised the common stereotype of a hard working and “industrious” people, who were driven only by monetary and mercantile gains. A study of these colonial writings will serve as a reminder of the discourse of colonialism within which the diaspora as a whole was circumscribed. In truth, the diaspora that was constructed by the “gaze” of the coloniser represents a community that was

⁴ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p.182.

possessed of other traits. The following chapters will go on to demonstrate how the identity of the diasporic Chinese was more complex than that depicted and analysed in the few available colonial and historical narratives; not least in relation to issues of “home”, identity, and belonging.

Chapter Two provides a theoretical framework for discussing and analysing the Chinese people. Entitled ‘Theorising the Early Diaspora: “Home” and Identity’, the chapter re-visits the concept of ‘diaspora’ as it has been defined and used by various theorists, such as William Safran, Gabriel Sheffer, Vijay Mishra, James Clifford, and Robin Cohen. The chapter is particularly concerned with what the term has meant over the centuries, and with the ways in which many of the earlier meanings of ‘diaspora’ have been adapted by academics working in different disciplines to describe the emergence of new ethnic communities. The term that is often used as a synonym for specific groups of people such as expatriates, migrants, or sojourners, has now also been used as a substitute for any group of ethnic people that has expanded and scattered away from the centre.⁵ Thus, the changing meanings of ‘diaspora’ stress the need for a vigorous interrogation of the concept beyond its initial derivative model. The chapter proposes that the first stage toward conceiving the definition of ‘diaspora’ is to be mindful of the instabilities and relational meanings of the term within specific geopolitical and cultural spaces, and the need to pay attention to the particularities of each diasporic group.

⁵ See for example Toloyan’s definition of ‘diaspora’, Khachig Toloyan, ‘Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment’ in *Diaspora* 5:1, 1996, p.10.

In light of the above, subsequent discussions of 'diaspora' suggest a re-working of its definition. With reference to existing diaspora theories, the chapter seeks to examine the ways in which these theories affirm or problematise the situation of the diasporic Chinese. The diaspora in Singapore bears testimony to a community and cultural discourse that is different from that of any other ethnic group. The discussion that follows will show why and how the notion of 'diaspora', a term that was based primarily on the Jewish people as the paradigmatic case, differs from that of the scattering of the Chinese people. The aim here is to take the classic Jewish diaspora as a point of departure for the study of the Chinese situation. The identity of the Chinese people in Singapore, like most diasporic groups, has always been heterogeneous. As Brah argues, 'all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even if they are implicated in the constructions of a 'common' we.'⁶ The chapter thus delineates the differentially raced, classed, and politicised identities within the early diasporic community. These alterities are manifest, for instance, between the China-born Chinese and the Straits-born Chinese, and their paradoxical relations to the concept of "home" and "Chinese identity".

The chapter also examines notions of belonging for subjects of the two diasporic groups. It proceeds to explore the Straits-born and China-born members over the different phases of the early diaspora from the nineteenth century till the 1950s, when the initial intent to "return" to the natal land had lost its priority for some of the latter immigrants. In that context, the discussion attempts to uncover the contrasting ways in which the Straits-born and China-born Chinese relate to the meaning of "home" within and outwith China, where multiple belongings and identities that are

⁶ Avtar Brah, *op. cit.*, p.184.

formulated in the wake of the diaspora's migratory experience are still in the process of being formed. The chapter then ends by examining the question of "Chineseness" in Singapore during the second half of the twentieth century, and demonstrates how, and in what ways, the early diaspora has developed and altered.

Using the discussion in Chapter Two as a conceptual tool to think about 'diaspora' and the concept of a Chinese identity, Chapter Three explores the subject-position of the Straits-born Chinese as it is culturally and textually constituted by an early literary journal: *The Straits Chinese Magazine*. The discussion here reveals how the ideas and thoughts of this diasporic group have found expression in the writings of the magazine. The narratives in the journal illustrate the ambitions of the Straits-born Chinese to reform the diaspora intellectually and socially, and to mediate between the traditional world of their Chinese culture on the one hand, and the more "modern" world of Western civilisation on the other. Through their writings, the chapter will demonstrate how members of this community are relationally positioned in the diaspora. It will examine the ways in which *The Straits Chinese Magazine* can be perceived as a space of partial resistance to colonialism, where discourses of imperialism were appropriated and contested.

Chapter Three thus begins with a discussion of the social and historical context in which *The Straits Chinese Magazine* was written and published, looking in particular at the funding and writers behind the magazine, the journal's readership and intended audience, and the types of literature that were subsumed within its pages. The discussion then follows with an examination of the wider social and political concerns that informed the writings in the magazine. A large number of critical essays written by

the Straits-born Chinese, for instance, stressed the need for social reforms, and these writings reflect the profound interest of the Straits-born community in the political movements that were taking place in China during the time. Likewise, the journal's widespread essays that are of a scientific and ethnographic nature reveal the anthropological impulses that informed the intellect and beliefs of the Straits-born Chinese, reflecting the extent to which the early diasporic writings of the community were mediated through a 'scientific' observation of various anthropological discourses. What this chapter aims to achieve as a whole therefore, is to tease out the multiplicity of meanings within the discourse of the magazine, especially its contradictions, and discern the ways in which the Straits-born Chinese evolved as a diasporic community, seeking to express and articulate for themselves an anglicised, Chinese identity.

The final chapter, entitled 'Autobiography, Biography, and the China-born Chinese in *Chinese Jetsam on a Tropic Shore* by N.I.Low and *China Roots* by Mark Tan', examines two autobiographical texts about the early China-born migrants. The chapter begins by setting the scene and exploring the development of Singaporean writing in English in the twentieth century, where a characteristic preoccupation in the production of Singaporean literature has been marked by a proliferation of the autobiographical and biographical genres. The discussion suggests reasons for this development, examining the ways in which Low and Tan exemplify a generation of Chinese diasporic writers in contemporary Singapore whose works reveal a preoccupation not only with the life story of the autobiographer, but with the immigrant community of the early nineteenth century, borne in part, and at once

inspired by the writers' own connection to an inherited diasporic ancestry.⁷ Within this context, the chapter explores the ways in which each text is presented as a personal and "authentic" life account of the China-born immigrant, bringing to light the ways in which the diasporic experience is re-produced and depicted in spatial metaphors of maps and landscape. Its overall focus is to look particularly at the imaginative use of "geography" in each autobiography, where the use of cartographical and topological images is tied to constructions of "home" and identity.

Chapter Four also raises important questions that are integral to the China-born subjects' assimilation and acculturation into the local Straits-born community. It explores the migrant subjects' negotiations of (un)belongings, their attitudes, as well as perceptions toward the diasporic community in which they are constituted. Clearly, how subjects in the diaspora handle the notion of a Chinese identity is a complex and personal issue. This is reflected in an examination of the literary texts which will reveal the contrasting experiences of two China-born Chinese, and their different responses to a Chinese diasporic identity. It discusses the issue of whether a generation of China-born immigrants who have decided to settle in the host nation is likely to break away from Chinese traditions and inherited culture, and the tensions this would generate for the diasporic subject's sense of being Chinese. The chapter highlights the problematic

⁷ Yeap Joo Kim, *Of Comb, Powder and Rouge*, Singapore: General Printing Services, 1992, p.24. My reading of Yeap's novel here is also informed by Graham Huggan's notion of the 'anthropological exotic'. Speaking in the context of African literature, Huggan warns that there is a danger in reading ethnic texts as simply 'a more or less transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific ... African world.' (p.37) Such an 'anthropological' approach to African writings, according to Huggan, will only serve to reinforce the assumption of literature as a mere reproduction of reality. See Graham Huggan, *The Post-colonial Exotic*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001. Within this context, it must be emphasised that my incorporating and alluding to Yeap's novel here, is not simply to provide an ethnographic reading of the early diaspora, but to afford an understanding, in fictional form, of the social and historical complexities, and indeed ambiguities, in which the early diasporic society was formed.

and provisional concept of “homeland” and “Chineseness”, not simply as essentialised constructs, but as cultural ones that are inseparable from power relations and change.

The thesis then concludes with a brief examination of the diaspora as it evolves into the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Recent movements of capital and people usher in new displacements, new border crossings, and new diasporic formations. The conclusion therefore brings to light the emergence of a Chinese identity that is reflective of a transnational moment, where subjects of the diaspora are constituted within a new world order that is dominated by information technology and capitalist advancement. Here, comparisons will be made between the diaspora of the nineteenth century and that of the late twentieth century. The thesis ends by discussing the trope of a late twentieth century, transnational Chinese: the *taikongren* (Chinese astronaut). I am concerned here with both the similarities and differences between the contemporary and the early diasporic subject. For example, the late twentieth and the twenty-first century Chinese, like its nineteenth century China-born counterpart, continues to live a life of sojourning and migration. However, unlike the early diasporic migrant, the contemporary subject is inscribed within a different temporality, different historical circumstances, and different economic processes. In this final discussion, I will therefore draw out some of the interconnections between the early diaspora and the one at present.

While each chapter has its own integrity, taken as a whole, the thesis reveals common preoccupations, and connections can be made between the chapters. For instance, all the chapters offer interpretations and pose questions about the concept of “Chineseness”. They reveal how both writers and theorists alike problematise notions

of a singular “home” and of a singular “Chinese identity”. Underpinning all four chapters is the contention that the subject position and constitution of the diasporic Chinese are not only multiple but also shifting in nature.

The aim of this study as a whole is twofold. First and foremost, it aims to develop different ways of perceiving and understanding the concept of a Chinese diasporic identity, and in doing so, to show how the early diaspora in Singapore can be constituted and represented. Secondly, an underlying aim of this study is to bring to light a literary tradition of English-language writing that has emerged in Singapore, and has been produced by Singaporean writers about the diaspora. Some of these writings that have been gathered from archives and existing publications will be included and analysed in this thesis.

Chapter 1

A Historical Context to the Early Chinese Diaspora in Singapore 1819-1950s.

The early diaspora in Singapore began as a part of the British colony of Peninsular Malaya,¹ and my aim in this chapter is to set the scene and draw together some of the key moments in its development. I argue that although Singapore during the nineteenth century was a settlement within Malaya, the early Chinese immigrants were an exclusive diasporic group in the sense that they were an ethnic enclave within the British settlements, and detached from the rest of the Malayan colonies. A combination of political and social factors paved the way for the settlement to become a separate enclave in British Malaya. On 29 January 1819, the British colonial officer Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in Singapore.² Raffles was the Chief Secretary of the British East India Company following his appointment in 1807, and was responsible for maintaining the economic and commercial interests of the Company, especially the 'administration, shipping, control of prices, [and] discipline' of Britain's colonies in the Far East.³ At the point of Raffles' arrival in Singapore, the settlement was densely wooded and sparsely inhabited, with only an *orang laut* village, in other words, a small fishing community. The inhabitants consisted of the Temenggong, the Prince of Johore, and about 150 Malay fishermen. The island was then part of the Malay empire of Johore and ruled by the Sultan, the Temenggong, and his senior minister. On 30

¹ 'Malaya' here refers to the Malay states that came under British protection, including Pahang, which came under British protection in 1888, Johore in 1914, Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah, and Perlis in 1909, Penang in 1786, and Malacca in 1795. The settlements of Penang and Malacca together with Singapore later formed the British Straits Settlements in 1826.

² Maurice Collis, *Raffles*, Singapore: Graham Brash Pte. Ltd., 1985 (first published 1966), p.134.

³ *ibid.*, p.22. Collis provides an account of Raffles biography, looking in particular at Raffles' career in government; his contributions to the project of colonial expansion, and his 'meteoric' rise from a clerk in the British East Indian Company to the position of Chief Secretary.

January 1819, Raffles and the Sultan signed an agreement for the British East India Company to set up a trading post in Singapore.⁴ In return for the sole right of trade on the island, the Sultan was given British protection and an annual income of \$5, 000. Singapore was thereafter placed under the administration and protection of the East India Company, marking the start of British colonisation and the island's establishment as a colony in British Malaya.

The introduction of colonial administration precipitated the economic and commercial growth of the fishing settlement. Throughout the nineteenth century, the colonial government adopted a free trade policy, keeping port charges to a minimum. Singapore was essentially a free port, and this attracted numerous traders to the colony. On February 1821, as Pan notes, the first Chinese junk arrived from Amoy, followed by a European China trade vessel five months later. By the end of the year, approximately 3000 trading vessels were known to have arrived in Singapore, contributing to a total of eight million dollars in import and export trade.⁵ The presence of a 'modicum of law and order' and of the British flag and troops, as the historian Tregonning suggests, made the settlement immediately popular.⁶ At the same time, the island's geographic location also played a role in its economic growth. In an essay published in 1854, Raffles writes that '[f]ew places offer greater natural facilities for commerce than Singapore'.⁷ The island's natural sheltered harbour, and its location at the southernmost end of the Straits of Malacca, rendered it a convenient port of trade

⁴ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1988*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989 (second edition), p.1.

⁵ Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The Story of the Overseas Chinese*, London: Arrow Books, 1998, p.27. See also C.M. Turnbull, *ibid.*, p.13.

⁶ K.G. Tregonning, *A History of Modern Malaya*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1964, p.100.

⁷ Stamford Raffles, 'Notices of Singapore' in *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, Vol. viii, 1854, p.106.

with China and the rest of the eastern archipelago. This trade consisted of various commodities and agricultural produce, some of which came from the Straits itself: rattans, sago, nutmeg, cloves and other jungle exports, while others came from China: tea, dried fish, silk, tobacco, and pottery; products that were shipped from Canton during the north-east monsoon in heavy Chinese junks.⁸ The numerous traders on the island would engage in commerce between China and the Straits Settlements or between Indian and China, buying and selling commodities that flowed into the colony. Singapore became the collecting and distributing centre of the Malay peninsula, central Sumatra and Borneo, and the island's strategic location, as Hall suggests, was the main reason for the island's spectacular economic and commercial growth.⁹ Thus, with its free trade policy, favourable geography, and status under colonial rule, Singapore during the nineteenth century thrived as an exchange port, achieving what Pan describes as 'supremacy in the vigorous seaborne commerce of Southeast Asia'.¹⁰ The island's importance as an entrepot port increased throughout the period of the early diaspora, with trade and revenue rising from two-fifths in 1870 to almost three-fifths in 1905.¹¹

The colony's economic success was also paralleled by a simultaneous growth in population. In 1821, historical records reveal that a total of about 5000 inhabitants, 3000 of whom were Malaya, more than 1000 Chinese, and approximately 600 Indians, Europeans and other ethnic minority group.¹² The first Chinese immigrants to arrive in Singapore came from Riau and Malacca, and were known as 'Straits-born Chinese', by

⁸ K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.107.

⁹ D.G.E. Hall, *op. cit.*, p.800.

¹⁰ Stamford Raffles, *op. cit.*, p.27.

¹¹ Jerome Ch'en and Nicholar Tarling (eds.), *Studies in the Social History of China and Southeast Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p.248.

virtue of their history of settlement in the Straits Settlements.¹³ Likewise, a steady influx of Malays to the settlement was also recorded to have taken place during the same period. The Malays were natives of the island and had a history of settlement in the colony; many others also came from the Malayan states of Malacca, Sumatra, and Riau. The community of Malays in Singapore however, was not very large, and by the early nineteenth century, constituted only a minority of the entire population in the colony. Most of this ethnic group tended to concentrate in the Malayan state of Malacca, where in 1860, more than three-quarters of the population of over 68000 were Malays.¹⁴ According to historical accounts, the industrial expansion of early Singapore led to the growth of trade, plantations, tin-mines, and infrastructure, and the work that was carried out in these areas was mainly dependent on the immigrant population, chiefly the Chinese, but also partly the Indians, as well as the native Malays.

Alongside the Chinese and Malays, the European and Indian settlers made up the rest of the community, and constituted a group of ethnic minorities. Most of the early Europeans, as the historian Turnbull suggests, were predominantly merchants and colonial officials from the British East India Company, and their residence in the colony was primarily for official and mercantile reasons.¹⁵ Singapore became an attractive port of call for the European business community not only because of its free trade policy but also because of recent developments in India. In 1813, the East India Company lost its monopoly of the India-Britain trade, and private merchants from

¹² C.M. Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p.13.

¹³ The following section provides an extensive discussion of the Straits-born Chinese; their origins, mores, culture, and subsequent settlement in the colony.

¹⁴ C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867*, London: The Athlone Press, 1972, p.17.

¹⁵ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1988*, *op. cit.*, p.15.

Britain and Europe did not hesitate to divert their businesses to Singapore.¹⁶ Thus, in 1820, a year after the island was founded, the first British firm 'Messrs. A.L. Johnston and Company' was established in Singapore, while in 1823, the Portuguese medical store 'Messrs. J. d'Almeida and Sons' came to being.¹⁷ These companies helped contribute to the economic history of the colony, and the European community grew steadily. The number of Europeans as a whole, however, remained a small minority, constituting the different levels of colonial administration and the merchant class.¹⁸ Similarly, the Indians in early Singapore were also drawn from the growing Indian mercantile community, who came from the nearby Malayan state of Penang. The vast majority of them were merchants or petty traders.¹⁹ With the growth of Singapore during the nineteenth century, there were also those who came directly from the homeland, such as the Tamil labourers from South India. However, compared to the rest of the immigrant population, historical records reveal that Indian migration to the colony was 'limited and irregular'; in 1845, Indians comprised less than 10 percent of Singapore's total population.²⁰ This was because most of the Indian immigrants had migrated earlier to Penang, which was possessed by the British in 1786, prior to the founding of Singapore. Indians made up the second largest community in the settlement, and as Turnbull says, 'played a more important role in Penang than in the other Straits Settlements.'²¹ Furthermore, a mandate issued by the colonial authorities in the 1920s also accounted for the limited number of Indian immigrants in early Singapore. In 1922, the government of India passed an Emigration Act which helped

¹⁶ K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.109.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ C.M. Turnbull. *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867, op. cit.* p.22.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ For more on the Indian diaspora in Singapore and the history of Indian migration to the island see Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970. See also George Catto, *Indians in Malaya*, Singapore: George Catto, 1961.

to regulate the system of Indian immigration, restricting the number of Indians to the colony. Nevertheless, despite its small numbers, the Indian community, together with the Chinese, Malays and Europeans, formed the population of early Singapore, constituting the cosmopolitan trading community that the colony had become. Indeed, by the second half of the century, in 1854, Raffles expresses his approval of the population, which, as he says, 'has already accumulated at Singapore' and is proliferating, due to the 'rapidity with which it daily increases'.²²

Yet, despite the intermixture of races that migrated to the colony, and the island's close proximity with the rest of the Malayan states, Singapore remained unique among the British colonies in that it was not governed by the indigenous Malays. According to historical sources, Raffles' relationship with the Malay chiefs became strained not long after his arrival as he distrusted the Temenggong and despised the Sultan's abuse of amnesty.²³ He thus paid the Malays their allowances and left them undisturbed in their own private precinct. Existing historical accounts also suggest that Raffles gradually eased them out of public life. On the eve of his departure in 1823, Raffles made an agreement with the Malays to buy out their judicial power and their rights to land, except in areas specially reserved for them. This particular convention, as Tregonning writes, was significant in 'placing British sovereignty over the entire island of Singapore beyond dispute', and in bringing the island 'together with the adjacent seas, straits and islets lying within a radius of ten miles' in full sovereignty and

²¹ C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867*, *op. cit.*, p.8.

²² Stamford Raffles, *op. cit.*, p.101.

²³ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1975*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.23. See also C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1988*, Singapore and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

property to the East India Company.²⁴ Raffles also decided that the general law of Singapore should be English law, while the rest of the Malay states should remain under Muslim law.²⁵ In return for their political and territorial rights, the Sultan was promised a monthly pension of \$1, 300 and the Temenggong \$700.

In 1824, Singapore became officially autonomous from Malay rule, as the East India Company secured its outright cession in order to cut itself free of Malay politics.²⁶ In 1826, Singapore was incorporated into the British Straits Settlements along with Penang and Malacca, but continued to remain semi-autonomous from the latter two Malayan states.²⁷ By 1836, Singapore was established as the permanent capital of the Straits Settlements.²⁸ The Malay community, the original inhabitants of the island, were permitted to live on the settlement but were not allowed to have any dealings without the Company's consent, and were hence effectively removed from any control over Singapore's future. Relations between the British government and the Malay rulers, however, were by and large affable throughout the nineteenth century. The ordinary Malay peasant's loyalty, as Hall claims, was to his Sultan and to the Muslim religion, and therefore kept very much to himself, living and operating within their own ethnic enclave.²⁹ Certainly, British relations with the Malays, and indeed the rest of the other races, from 1819 onwards until the end of colonial rule, were generally cordial, and this was due to the *laissez-faire* policy which the colonial authorities had adopted towards the administration of the colony.³⁰ The British attitude

²⁴ K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.105.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.24.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.30.

²⁷ C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867, op. cit.* p.1.

²⁸ K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.36.

²⁹ D.G.E. Hall, *op. cit.*, p.799.

³⁰ C.M. Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p.49.

towards its colonies, Tregonning says, 'was one of non-interference', and this was characteristic of colonial rule within the Malay Peninsula.³¹ For the most part, Britain's involvement in Singapore's affairs was lax and minimal, and the colonial government appeared to adopt a semi-autonomous reign over the settlement. This is evident, in particular, in the government's encouragement of the active participation of local, non-European individuals in government and legislation.

During the nineteenth century, there existed a hierarchy of positions in which distinguished individuals of the local community could undertake in government: first as Justices of Peace, second as Municipal Commissioners, third as members of the Chinese Advisory Board, and finally as members of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council. The chief duty of these local leaders, as an article published in 1898 reveals, was to 'represent the views of the Chinese, and to safeguard as much as possible the interest of his countrymen.'³² To that extent, members of the various Councils 'should be regarded as representing all sections of the Chinese' and be accessible to 'all parties on matters relating to the work of the Council.'³³ In 1836, the Royal Charter of Justice was granted to the Straits Settlements, and this allowed Singapore to establish her own system of justice. In 1855, the colony's own judicial establishment came to being and local settlers of good standing were appointed as justices of the peace.³⁴ In nineteenth century Singapore, as Yong suggests, members of good standing were defined largely by their wealth, profession, and status, and many of these members comprised of individuals from the Straits-born Chinese, mercantile community. The Straits-born

³¹ K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.144.

³² 'News and Notes' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 2 No.7, Sept. 1898, p.119.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ For more on the role and functions of these various councils see C.F. Yong, *ibid.*

Chinese were the first immigrants to arrive in the colony, and had established themselves as respectable and responsible leaders. Thus, between 1819 and 1900, several influential leaders such as Tan Tock-seng, Tan Kim-seng, and Seah Eu-chin emerged in the colony, all of whom had been conferred the title of Justice of Peace in 1846, 1850, and 1872, respectively.³⁵

From 1819 until the early twentieth century, the colonial government adopted a system of indirect rule, and enlisted the co-operation of distinguished Straits-born Chinese individuals in the various councils to help manage the colony. In 1897 for instance, the Straits Chinese merchant Hoo Ah-Kay became the first non-European member to be appointed to the Legislative Council. In 1899, well-known capitalists Tan Jiak Kim, Lee Cheng Yan, and Tan Cheng Tuan represented the community on the Chinese Advisory Board, while in 1900, twelve Chinese individuals were appointed as Assessors and members of the legislative council.³⁶ Generally, as Yong explains, leaders who served in government had little cause to be displeased with the colonial administration, as the latter brought about law and order, and this proved essential for the development of trade and commerce. In fact, the leaders took pride in the fact that they played a part in the government of the colony. As a local writer W.C. Lin writes in 1899, the Chinese have always regarded the 'seating in the Legislative Council allotted to their community as a sign of the good sense and justice of the British Government,' and 'have looked upon the Chinese member of Council as their

³⁵ C.F. Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore*, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992. For more on these influential diasporic individuals, see Chapter One on 'Chinese Leadership in Nineteenth Century Singapore'. Section four of this chapter on 'The Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese under Colonial Rule' also provides a more detailed discussion of the role of the Straits-born Chinese, their relations with the colonial administration, and their status as elite members of the early diaspora.

representative, who shall voice their grievances in Council'.³⁷ On the other hand, from the perspective of the British government, as Yen suggests, wealthy capitalists who were given positions of leadership in the community were also merchants who contributed directly to the growth and prosperity of the colony, and as such, were therefore considered desirable and useful as a class.³⁸ The growth of the colony was thus propelled by these prominent leaders, and the government of the island was aided by local individuals throughout the period of colonial rule, that is, until the early twentieth century, with the arrival of the Japanese.

Towards the 1930s, during the period of World War Two, the history of Singapore underwent a period of change. There was a suspension of discourse between Britain and the colony from 1939 to 1945, when the settlement was captured and occupied by the Japanese. Singapore was renamed 'Syonan', and throughout the years of the occupation, the *Tekkikan* (Japanese secret service) and the *Kempeitai* (Japanese army) governed the colony. Japan's rule over the island was harsh, and as Tregonning writes, 'two characteristics of the occupation [were]: economic hardship and Japanese brutality.'³⁹ It was hardly surprising then that during the period, anti-Japanese sentiment prevailed, and this was expressed in Singapore by boycotts of Japanese goods and in popular support for the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPJA). The MPJA began as a small group of individuals that had been armed and trained by the British military, but grew to an army of 7000 during the occupation. The Party displayed a unified anti-Japanese attitude, pledging assistance to the colonial

³⁶ Yen Ching-Hwang, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800-1911*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1980, p.148.

³⁷ W.C. Lin, 'Some Local Chinese Worthies' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.3 No.11 Dec. 1899, p.82.

³⁸ Yen Ching-Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.8.

government to help fight Japan. On 6 September 1945, with the help of the MPJA, Singapore was liberated from the Japanese by British troops, and British colonialism resumed. The MPJA was disbanded, and its members returned to civilian life.

Following the period of Japanese rule in 1945, the latter half of the twentieth century saw even greater changes in the political history of Singapore. The following year, in 1946, the Malay states were incorporated into a Malayan Union from which Singapore remained autonomous and was brought under a separate Governor.⁴⁰ Britain segregated the settlement from the rest of British possessions in the Malay peninsula and made the island a crown colony.⁴¹ In 1948, a new Federation of Malaya was established but it included again, the rest of the Malayan settlements, except for Singapore. The reason for this exclusion was mainly because the colony's Chinese population, if combined with the rest of the Chinese in the peninsula, would have made them the largest ethnic group and this was displeasing to the Malays. Moreover, as Tregonning suggests, the settlement's exclusion could have been countered 'had there been strong pressure by Singapore leaders; but there was none whatsoever.'⁴² In 1957, however, the precarious situation of Singapore improved, with the possibility that the colony would be able to secure complete internal autonomy, and in 1959, the colony, which had earlier been excluded from the Malayan Union and Federation, was granted

³⁹ K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.277.

⁴⁰ D.G.E Hall, *A History of South-east Asia*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968, pp.883-889. Hall suggests two reasons for Singapore's exclusion from the Malayan Union. For one, had Singapore been included, the predominantly Chinese population would constitute 45 per cent of the entire population in Malaya, with the Malays making up the minority, with only 43.3 per cent. However, without Singapore in the Union, the positions were reversed, with the Malays making up 49.5 per cent and the Chinese 38.4 per cent. Another reason for Singapore's exclusion from the Union was also that Malaya was dependent largely on the revenue generated from custom duties, and Singapore, with its free port policy, did not contribute to this revenue. See also Victor Purcell, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

⁴¹ Peter A. Busch, *Legitimacy and Ethnicity. A Case Study of Singapore*, Canada and United States: Lexington Books, 1974, p.25.

⁴² K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.299.

self-government.⁴³ In May the same year, the first general election took place, and a local political organisation known as the People's Action Party (PAP) led by Lee Kuan Yew and his supporters, came into power. The PAP won 43 out of 51 seats, and Mr. Lee became the state's first premier. Under the leadership of the PAP, Singapore underwent its transition to complete autonomy. In 1963, Singapore and the rest of the Malayan colonies became independent from British rule, and in 1965, the settlement was established as a nation-state on its own, officially divorced from Malaya.⁴⁴

The Development of the Early Diaspora: The Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese.

The early diaspora was comprised of two diasporic communities: the Straits-born Chinese and the China-born Chinese. Writing in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* (1899), Song Ong Siang comments that the Chinese population in the Straits Settlements can be arranged into 'two distinct divisions'. He refers to these as the 'immigrant section' and the 'permanent section',⁴⁵ or, in other words, the China-born Chinese and the Straits-born Chinese. His essay is useful in differentiating between the two diasporic groups in the early Chinese community. Similarly, John R. Clammer,

⁴³ D.G.E. Hall, *op. cit.*, p.866.

⁴⁴ Also in 1963, Singapore merged briefly with Malaya to form a new Federation of Malaysia. Britain favoured the merger mainly because Singapore was perceived too small a settlement to become a separate nation-state, and therefore not economically viable. Thus, under the new Federation, Singapore and Malaya continued to be linked through a single currency system and through the interdependence of the peninsula's port and financial facilities. The merger, however, proved to be short-lived. The reasons for this are similar to those for Singapore's exclusion in the Malayan Union in 1946. For one, the large Chinese population in Singapore made it difficult to preserve Malay political hegemony. For another, the dominant political party in Malaysia, the conservative Alliance party, insisted on special rights for Malays, and on a Malay national identity. This clearly did not go down well with the Chinese in Singapore who made up the majority of the island's population. Conflict reached a point where politicians from the Alliance's Malay section demanded the arrest of Lee Kuan Yew for treason, as he was deemed a threat to the national dominance of the Malays. For these reasons, Singapore was excluded from the Federation of Malaya in 1965. For more on the subject see *ibid.*, pp.1-35; D.G.E Hall, *op. cit.*

writing on the early diaspora from a sociological perspective, also brings to light the fracture within the diasporic community. The early Chinese community, as he says, comprises the Straits-born Chinese and their China-born counterparts, where the influx of 'migrants from China began to highlight the internal sociological differentiations of the Chinese population as a whole.'⁴⁶ The socio-historical evidence provided by Clammer's and Song's study of the diasporic Chinese, as we shall soon see, is thus enlightening in illuminating the social and cultural context in which the early diaspora was framed. With reference to various nineteenth and twentieth century scholars, the objective of this section then, is to explore the nineteenth century distinction between the Straits-born and the China-born Chinese of the early diaspora. It seeks to examine some of the differences between the two communities, and to explore the reasons for these. The section begins by looking at the history and characteristics of the Straits-born Chinese. It then ends by looking at the identity of the China-borns and the factors leading to their migration to the settlement.

The Straits-born Chinese.

The Straits-born Chinese and their China-born counterparts differ in their origins and in the timing of their arrival to Singapore. The issue here is to address the historical and sociological circumstances of each community's diasporic experience. Most historical accounts of the early diaspora reveal that the Straits-born Chinese were the first of these groups to arrive in Singapore, thus the phrase 'Straits-born' is

⁴⁵ Song Ong Siang, 'Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 3 No. 10, June 1899, p.61.

⁴⁶ John R. Clammer, *op. cit.*, p.84.

indicative of their place of origin and settlement.⁴⁷ The historical accounts by Europeans who came into contact with the early diaspora describe how these people came predominantly from the settlement of Malacca and the nearby Riau islands.⁴⁸ Contemporary records on the early Chinese also suggest that the Straits-borns were one of the first to arrive in Singapore, and that they came from Johor - the Malay state in the Riau Archipelago, which included Singapore and the Riau islands.⁴⁹ Song Ong Siang describes the community in 1899:

It comprises of all Chinese people who have been born of Chinese parentage in these settlements, have lived all their lives here and intend to find a resting place for their bones in our soil. ... This permanent or native section of our Chinese population is spoken of as the Straits-Chinese.⁵⁰

It is clear from the above that the Straits-borns are defined as local-born Chinese hailing from the Straits Settlements. The words 'permanent' and 'native' indicate their long history of settlement in the region, and suggest that they have been residents in the Straits Settlements for generations, and regard themselves as natives in the region. The phrase 'born of Chinese parentage' also implies that members of the community are of Chinese descent, and this is reinforced in Felix Chia's sociological account of the

⁴⁷ As with common usage in existing literature on the community, the terms 'Straits-born Chinese' and its contracted forms 'Straits-born' and 'Straits Chinese' will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Various writers have used these terms synonymously, see for instance, John R. Clammer, 'Straits Chinese Society', Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1980; Victor Purcell, *op. cit.* and C.F. Yong, *op. cit.* A detailed examination of the different connotations of the terms will also be discussed in the following paragraphs.

⁴⁸ C.M. Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p.14, and Victor Purcell, *op. cit.*, p. 70. The first Chinese from Singapore were thought to arrive from the settlement of Malacca and the Riau island. The historical account of the Chinese in Lynn Pan (ed.), *op. cit.*, concurs with Purcell's records.

⁴⁹ Lynn Pan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.172. The writer Felix Chia for instance, suggests that most families of the Straits-born Chinese community in Singapore came specifically from Malacca. Felix Chia, *The Babas*, Singapore: Times Books International, 1980, p.9. Again, it is important to note that the word 'Chinese' that occurs in the sentence is used as a generic term. However, this usage of the term will alter when it is used in relation to the Straits-born Chinese or China-born Chinese.

⁵⁰ Song Ong Siang, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

Straits-born Chinese society. The Straits-borns in Malaya, as Chia asserts, are people of Chinese ancestry, and whose ancestors came from 'Amoy and other parts of Fukien province' in China.⁵¹

Historians and scholars such as Chia and Song have attempted to account for the ancestry of the Straits-born Chinese in Singapore. According to most historical sources, the ancestors of this community were the earliest settlers to arrive in Malaya.⁵² The arrival of these pioneer immigrants dates back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with the earliest record of their presence in Malacca dating to around 1400.⁵³ Yen Ching Hwang has recorded the presence of a Chinese trading community in the port-city of Malacca in 1511, shortly before the settlement came under Portuguese rule. He suggests that Malacca was one of the few ports in Malaya which were known earlier on to the Chinese through political and commercial contacts,⁵⁴ and, according to him, the total number of Chinese inhabitants in Malacca during this period is not certain, although there was undoubtedly a sufficient number of settlers there to form a 'Campon China', or Chinatown, at the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁵⁵ The sociologist Clammer, however, offers a different interpretation of the ancestry of the Straits-born Chinese in Singapore. He claims that the Straits-born settlers had migrated to the settlement only when the British arrived in 1819, or 'shortly before the

⁵¹ Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.1.

⁵² Some historians have described the ancestors of the Straits-born Chinese as "China-born" because of their origins in China. However, I refrain from using the term "China-born" here in order to distinguish them from the China-born Chinese who arrived in the diaspora later in the nineteenth century. By 'earliest settlers' here I am referring specifically to the ancestors of the Straits-born Chinese. The difference between these earliest settlers and the latter China-born Chinese stems from the fact that these earliest settlers preceded the migration of the China-born Chinese to the settlement.

⁵³ Lynn Pan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.172.

⁵⁴ Yen Ching Hwang, *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution*, London: Oxford University Press, 1976, p.3.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.1.

independence of Singapore'.⁵⁶ It would appear from Clammer's account, that he diverges from Yen's historical interpretation, although he does agree with Yen that the ancestors of the Straits-born Chinese were likely to be the earliest Chinese immigrants to arrive in Malaya. It is possible that Clammer's assertions of the Straits-born community was informed by early historical accounts of the diaspora, which concur that the Straits-born Chinese had arrived to the colony only in 1819, at the outset of British rule. It is well attested that colonial advances in the Malayan states brought about new opportunities for commerce and trade, attracting Chinese settlers to the region. It would thus strike me that both Clammer's and Yen's propositions of the history of the Straits-born Chinese are tenable, for the Straits-borns, who arrived in Singapore at the early nineteenth century, may well have migrated from Malacca, and were relations or descendants of pioneer Chinese immigrants, whose presence in Malaya dates as far back as the sixteenth century.

Most accounts of the Straits-born Chinese reveal that their ancestors were predominantly Chinese traders from Amoy, Chuan-chou, and other parts of the Fukien Province in China.⁵⁷ Chuan-chou was one of the important ports for foreign trade in China and is situated close to Amoy, which is another significant port in South China and an important gateway for Chinese migration from the Fukien province to Malaya. Many of the Straits-born Chinese have ancestral links to the Fukien province of South China, and historical accounts of these earliest settlers suggest that their reasons for coming to Malacca were primarily for mercantile and trade purposes.⁵⁸ The earliest Chinese who visited Malaya, Chia suggests, were adventurers who came to seek a

⁵⁶ John R. Clammer, *Straits Chinese Society*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1980, p.2.

⁵⁷ Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.1.

living or to make a fortune,⁵⁹ and many of them were merchants who used Malacca as a central port for their trading activities in Malaya, and later settled there for commercial purposes.⁶⁰

The arrival of these pioneer immigrants helped to build a permanent Straits-born Chinese community in Malacca and in Singapore. Historical sources describe how some of these immigrants eventually took up residence in the area, as they were either too poor to return to China, or too rich and did not want to leave their property and businesses behind.⁶¹ There were also those who married indigenous Malay women, and subsequently established permanent homes in the region.⁶² The local-born children of such alliances were the Straits-born Chinese. As the pioneer immigrants continued to marry the indigenous women, the population of Straits Chinese continued to expand in Malacca and in the rest of Malaya.⁶³

⁵⁸ Lynn Pan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.172.

⁵⁹ Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.1

⁶⁰ Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.1.

⁶¹ C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867*, *op. cit.*, p.86.

⁶² G. William Skinner, 'Creolised Chinese Societies in Southeast Asia' in Anthony Reid (ed.), *Sojourners and Settlers*, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1996, pp.51-93. In the essay, Skinner has argued that '[p]rior to the late nineteenth century, women were simply not permitted to leave China, so that not only in the Philippines, Java, and Malaya but everywhere else overseas, male immigrants necessarily turned to indigenous women.' (p.52). For more on the development of the Straits-born Chinese community see John R. Clammer, *Straits Chinese Society*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1980. It is also interesting to note that in his essay on 'Creolised Chinese Societies', Skinner looks at two other regions in Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Java, and the cultural fusion that has taken place between the Chinese and indigeneous peoples in those parts. He examines the migration and historical development of the Chinese Mestizos of the Philippines, the Chinese Peranakans of Java, and the Chinese *Babas* of Malacca, Penang and Singapore. For further reading on the Peranakans in Java, see G. William Skinner, 'Java's Chinese Minority: Continuity and Change' in *Journal of Asian Studies (JAS)* 20, 1961, pp.35-62. Research on the Mestizos of the Philippines can be found in Chen Ching-ho, *The Chinese Community in the Sixteenth Century Philippines*, Tokyo: Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1968, and Leonard Blusse, *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women, and the Dutch in VOC Batavia*, Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1986.

⁶³ This is one way of defining 'Straits-born Chinese', as a group that has come about as a result of intermarriages between the Chinese and Malays. However, it must also be noted that this definition of

Researchers and scholars have used a variety of terms to refer to the Straits-born Chinese. In Singapore, as William Skinner suggests, for two generations after they arrived in the settlement members of this community were often referred to as 'Melakan Chinese'.⁶⁴ Skinner's suggestion is aligned with Yen's theory that the Straits-born Chinese originated from Malacca, and the community was defined as 'Melakans' when they first migrated to the settlement of Singapore in 1819. The historian Victor Purcell however, uses the terms 'Straits-born', 'Straits-born Chinese' and 'Straits-Chinese' interchangeably. The use of the different appellations, as suggested by Skinner, Yen, and Purcell may well have arisen from the way the terms have evolved over time. By the late nineteenth century, the phrase 'Straits-born Chinese' appeared to have been used in favour of 'Melakan Chinese'. Certainly, by 1897, the phrase 'Straits-born Chinese' was predominantly employed, and this is evident from an early literary journal *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, where the terms 'Straits-born Chinese' and its contracted form 'Straits Chinese' are used synonymously. Since the nineteenth century, the term 'Straits-born Chinese' thus became prevalent, and remained as such throughout the twentieth century, used commonly by writers and academics alike in their writings of the community.

The application of the various terminology therefore reveals the extent to which writers such as Purcell and Skinner have constructed the meaning of 'Straits-born Chinese' in different ways. The use of the term is ambiguous, but then the identity of this community (as we shall soon see) is elusive. Some researchers use the term 'Straits-born Chinese' synonymously with two other terms: *baba* and *peranakan*. At

'Straits-born Chinese' is by no means definite. The following paragraphs will show how various historians and writers alike have problematised the meaning of the term.

one point in his sociological account of the community, Jurgen Rudolph refers to them as '*peranakans*', 'the *peranakan* families',⁶⁵ while at another point he refers to the Straits-born Chinese as 'the *babas* in 19th-century Singapore' and their women as '*Nyonyas*' or '*Bibiks*'.⁶⁶ On the other hand, Chia makes a distinction between the term 'Straits-born Chinese' and *baba* and argues for it, suggesting that a Straits-born is a Chinese who was born locally in the Straits Settlements. In contrast, a *baba* is a Straits-born who was not only born in the Straits, but is an offspring of a Chinese and Malay union. According to Chia, a *baba* is a Straits-born Chinese, but the reverse is not necessarily true. Chia's definition here appears to problematise the earlier definition of 'Straits-born Chinese' as a group that has emerged as a result of intermarriages between the Chinese and Malays. The origins of the word *baba* is therefore problematic and the term, in my view, should not be employed universally to distinguish the locally born and assimilated Chinese. Moreover, from an epistemological point of view, the exact origins of the term itself is shrouded in mystery. On the one hand, it could be perceived as a variant form of the Malay word *bapa*, which is employed as an honorific when addressing one's father. On the other hand, it could also be used as a form of addressing young males as in the Hokkien and Teochew word *A-ba*.

In light of these conflicting definitions, it is thus not at all clear from the above evidence whether Yen's, Purcell's, Skinner's, Rudolph's or Chia's etymological speculations are accurate. It remains controversial whether 'Straits-born Chinese'

⁶⁴ G. William Skinner, *op. cit.*, p.58.

⁶⁵ Jurgen Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore*, Singapore: Ashgate, 1998, p.263.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.225.

refers specifically to those who are offsprings of Chinese and Malay unions, or simply those who were born locally in the Straits Settlements.⁶⁷ With the exception of Chia, most writers use the term *baba* synonymously with 'Straits-born Chinese'. The historians Lynn Pan and Wang Gungwu use the latter term interchangeably with *peranakan* and *baba*. David Yen-ho Wu, however, uses the term *peranakan* to refer specifically to the Malay-Chinese hybrid in Indonesia.⁶⁸ It is evident, therefore, that historians and writers use the terms 'Straits-born Chinese', *peranakan* and *baba* inconsistently. My understanding of the existing etymological literature is that to make sense of the different terms, it would be necessary to examine how the community defined itself during the nineteenth century. This is evident from *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, which does not make use of the term *peranakan*,⁶⁹ but adopts the terms *baba* and 'Straits-born Chinese' instead. In an essay published in 1897, the writer Song Ong Siang makes references to both these categories:

A comparison of the figures in the Census for 1881 and for 1891 will show that the excess of Straits-born Chinese women over men, which was 1,632 had increased by 411 in 1891. Apart from that, as a matter of general observation you are aware that the number of Nyoayayas is slightly greater than that of Babas.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ The rest of this section attempts to formulate a definition of 'Straits-born Chinese' that takes into consideration all these various conceptualisations, and argues for a more inclusive way of defining what it means to be 'Straits-born'.

⁶⁸ David Yen-ho Wu, 'The Construction of Chinese and Non-Chinese Identities' in Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *The Living Tree. The Changing Meaning of being Chinese Today*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994, p.161. My position is that it is not viable to use the terms *peranakan* and *baba* interchangeably. It is well attested that the term *peranakan* refers specifically to the Chinese-Malay hybrids of Java in Indonesia. Pan herself has stated that the *peranakans* are descendants of the early Chinese immigrants in Java. The linguistic evidence also suggests that *baba* is a Malay term which refers specifically to the male gender. It is would therefore be incorrect to use the terms Straits-born Chinese, *peranakan*, and *baba* synonymously.

⁶⁹ My understanding of this, and Skinner's research would support it, is that the term *peranakan* is used to refer specifically to the Malay-Chinese hybrids of Java. This would explain why the term was not used in the magazine. See G. William Skinner, *op. cit.*, p.51.

In the first sentence, Song uses the phrase 'Straits-born Chinese' as a generic term to refer to the community as a whole, while in the second sentence, he uses the terms 'Nyoayas' and 'Babas' to refer to the females and males in the community respectively. It is evident that the term *baba* is implicitly gendered, and this raises the problem with using the term synonymously with 'Straits-born Chinese', as most historians and writers have done, in that it normalises the exclusion of 'Nyoayas'. Using the term *baba* instead of Straits-born Chinese also masculinises the whole community. It would be misleading then to refer to the Straits-born Chinese as *baba*, or for that matter as *peranakan*. The linguistic context from which the term 'Straits-born Chinese' is derived is immensely complex, and the use of the appellation is controversial. My view of the available evidence is that during the nineteenth century, 'Straits-born Chinese' was the phrase used by members of the community themselves and the diaspora at large. Such an appellation should therefore be applied generically to the local Straits Chinese, while *baba* and *nonya* should be used to refer to the males and females in the community.⁷¹

The term 'Straits-born Chinese' is indicative of the complex identity of this diasporic group, a complexity that emerges from their culturally hybridised character which sets them apart from the rest of the diaspora. This is illustrated in various historical and socio-cultural accounts of the community. For example, in his text *The Babas*, Chia reveals that the Straits-borns have a language of their own, known as *Baba Malay*, which, as he explains, is a version of the Malay language with 'Chinese

⁷⁰ Song Ong Siang, 'The Position of Chinese Women' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No.1, March 1897, p.20.

⁷¹ The term 'Straits-born Chinese', and its contracted forms 'Straits Chinese' or 'Straits-born' will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis.

words and phrases of the Hokkien dialect.⁷² During the period of the early diaspora, members of this community speak little or no Chinese at all, and they use *Baba Malay* both at home and as a lingua franca. In an essay published in 1899, *Baba Malay* is described as ‘a patois of the Malay language, largely adulterated with foreign idioms and words.’⁷³ Thus, as a creolised patois that is imbued with foreign phrases and words, *Baba Malay* can be perceived as having derived from a fusion of both the Chinese and Malay languages, and is evidence of the cross-linguistic pollination that has occurred between the Straits-born Chinese and the indigenous community. For instance, the expressions *chilaka!* and *yeow siew* are usually articulated together and used often by any irate Straits-born to curse or chide another person. The word *chilaka*, which in translation means ‘the damned one’, is derived from the Malay word *celaka*,⁷⁴ while the word *yeow siew*, which describes a person as jinxed, is a direct transplantation of its synonym from the Chinese Hokkien dialect. Chia lists the peculiarities of the *Baba Malay* as it is used within the community. He highlights, for instance, the word *abuk* (dust) as it is used within the Malay language, and its adaptation *abok* as it is borrowed and used within *Baba Malay*; also the word *adat* (custom) as it is used in the Malay language, and in its modified form *hadat* as it is used in *Baba Malay*.⁷⁵

Baba Malay also draws on the English language; thus it is common, for example, to find a scattering of English words within it, such as in the sentence ‘Kiat suda modern’ (Kiat has become modern).⁷⁶ This may be related to the fact that from

⁷² Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.9.

⁷³ ‘The Language of the Babas’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.3 No.9, March 1899, p.12.

⁷⁴ Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.40.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.62.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p.49.

the outset of colonial rule, from 1819 until the 1950s, many Straits-born Chinese were educated in the English language, and the occurrence of English terms in *Baba Malay* suggests that members of this community consciously or otherwise draw on their knowledge of the language. For instance, Seah Liang Seah, an influential Straits-born Chinese merchant of the late nineteenth century, was educated in the English language. His competence in the language was noted in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* which reveals that 'he learned English at St. Joseph's Institution - better known as the Brothers' School'.⁷⁷ The success of Seah's academic and professional career was such that he was later appointed by the colonial official Sir F. Weld as a member of the Legislative Council. Seah's colonial schooling is an indication both of his English-influenced values and of his anglicised "roots". Many Straits Chinese families, as Pan suggests, sent their sons to be educated in the English language, 'convinced that to adopt the language of the colonial masters was a precondition for getting on in the world.'⁷⁸ The popularity of an English language education was also reflected in the various anglicised institutions which the Straits-born Chinese had established during the early nineteenth century. The Anglo-Chinese College, Penang Free School, and Raffles Institution established in 1814, 1816, and 1823 respectively,⁷⁹ are a few of such examples. Both these institutions adopted a British educational system, and were means through which the Straits-born Chinese could learn the English language. Pan sums it up effectively when she says that '[t]he Babas had a language of their own, a sort of Malay laced with Hokkien and even English words or phrases'.⁸⁰ To that

⁷⁷ W.C. Lin, *op. cit.*, p.82.

⁷⁸ Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The Story of the Overseas Chinese, op. cit.*, p.171.

⁷⁹ Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.71.

⁸⁰ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.170.

extent, the language or patois of the Straits-born Chinese thus best exemplifies their hybrid identity.

Due to their linguistic and socio-cultural adjustments to the local community, the Straits-born Chinese of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embody an identity that may also be described, G.W. Skinner suggests, as 'creolised'.⁸¹ This is particularly manifest in the women's style of dressing, which is of Malay origin, yet also bears traits of Chinese origin and is therefore quite different from that which Malay women would wear.⁸² Like the Malays, women in the community would wear the *sarong*. However, what distinguishes the Straits-born Chinese from the Malay women is that along with the *sarong*, the former would also wear a *baju panjang*, which is a long tunic stretched down to the ankles and worn with a set of three *kerosang*, or brooches.⁸³ In Chia research on the women, for instance, he notes that the *nonyas* wore the *baju panjang*, with colours and designs befitting their age. In their choice of apparel, the older and married *nonyas* would usually choose 'conservative colours and simple designs', while the younger ones adorned 'vivid colours and flowery patterns'.⁸⁴ The long tunic would then be worn with the *kerosang*, which consisted of a chain of two round brooches and a heartshaped one, 'worn at the topmost part of the tunic, [and] noticeably larger.'⁸⁵ Rudolph's exploration of the Straits-born Chinese women also brings to light the main characteristics of their attire. In his study, a young *nonya* describes the way of life of her grandmother, and Rudolph transcribes it as follows:

⁸¹ G. William Skinner, *op. cit.*, p.51.

⁸² Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.15.

⁸³ *ibid.*, pp.15-16.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p.16.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

My granny she always has [...] lots of [...] *Peranakan* friends from Malacca and from whatever, all those *Bibiks* [...]. All wear those *sarongs* and those *baju* and *keroncong*, and then ... they eat *sireh*, and then their teeth are all red.⁸⁶

The Straits Chinese culture is embodied in the figure of the *nonyas* or ‘*Bibiks*’ described in the account above, and is characterised by the way they wear their Malay-influenced attire and the way they eat *sireh* (a betel nut wrapped in lotus leaf). The ‘*baju [panjang]*’ together with the *kerosang* are clearly a common feature, and both of these accessories epitomise the distinctive apparels of the female in the community. This was true not only of the women in Singapore but of the *nonyas* from Malacca. In their choice of clothing, as Skinner suggests, the culture of the Straits-born Chinese could be described as creolised.⁸⁷ Thus, this integration of Chinese and Malay cultural norms marks the mixed ethnicity of the community.

In some cases, the Straits-born Chinese are also offsprings of Chinese and Malay unions, and as Tregonning’s study suggest, these Straits-born Chinese, like the ‘Malacca *baba* community, dressed and spoke in the Malay manner’.⁸⁸ Their speech and manners thus reflect the combination of two cultural influences and heritage. An early historical account of this community also sheds light on their assimilation into the Malay and Chinese cultures. In his description of the early diaspora published in 1903, C.B. Buckley describes a Malacca-born Chinese who has emigrated to Singapore:

⁸⁶ Jurgen Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p.262.

⁸⁷ G. William Skinner, *op. cit.*, p.62. More on the hybrid identity of the Straits-born Chinese can be found in Chapter Two.

⁸⁸ K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.176.

The Malacca-born Chinese, such as Chang Long, held more direct intercourse with Europeans than the other Chinese. Many were born of Malay mothers, but as they wore the dress of their fathers they were scarcely to be distinguished from the actual native of China⁸⁹

The 'Malacca-born Chinese' form a part of the wider community of Straits-born Chinese in the Straits Settlements of Malaya. Similar to the subject in Tregonning's account, the description of Chang Long in the narrative exemplifies the Straits Chinese complex identity. However, contrary to what Tregonning has written, Buckley's study above reveals that the Straits-born Chinese were more inclined towards the Chinese culture in terms of their demeanour and daily apparel. This inconsistency in the results of Tregonning's and Buckley's study serves to demonstrate how conflictual and complex the identity of the Straits-born Chinese can be. This was especially the case when the community itself was far from homogeneous. The fact that they are born of Malay mothers but wear the dress of their Chinese fathers indicates their identification with the "Chinese" culture. At the same time, it is perhaps also the case that the Straits-born Chinese under discussion willingly embrace their mixed heritage, and it is this cultural mix of Chinese and indigenous elements that constitutes their hybrid identity.

On another level, as a result of British colonisation and their interaction with the British colonials, the Straits-born Chinese were also influenced by the ways of the colonial masters. Again, Chia's research present a glimpse into the profile of this diasporic group. He elaborates on the Straits-born Chinese's associations with the colonial authorities, as embodied particularly in the figure of their younger males, who were often engaged at social gatherings and described thus:

⁸⁹ C.B. Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, London: Little Press, 1903, p.320.

The younger *Babas* of the latter part of the nineteenth century ... sported Western-style coats and trousers; ... Bow-ties, starched shirts and stiff collars, and open coats with matching pants were worn at social gatherings. At more formal functions where the rich or the important entertained, white tie and tails and even top hats, made their appearance.⁹⁰

The passage above demonstrates a tendency on the part of the Straits-born Chinese men, in the latter part of the century, to adopt and emulate the cultural habits and mannerisms of the colonial masters. What the passage also reveals is that the fashion and style of dressing of these young individuals are indicative of their status and position in society, where 'white ties and tails and even top hats' are often worn on occasions where rich and distinguished guests are present. There is, however, a degree of irony in the way that the Straits-born Chinese ape the colonial masters who dominate over them, where the whole process of colonisation appears to have been enacted in their behaviour and cultural understanding of the colonial ways. It would appear from the above excerpt that the Straits Chinese have absorbed aspects of the colonial people, and their clothes and social mannerisms reflect the ways in which they locate themselves within the dominant culture. Moreover, there is further evidence to suggest that throughout the period of the diaspora, those Straits-born Chinese in the community who were educated in England have also taken to the leisure activities of the British people, and could be seen 'drinking brandy and soda, playing billiards and bowls'.⁹¹ The historian Turnbull describes their colonial-influenced life-style: '[i]ncreasing numbers of Straits Chinese adopted the Western customs, and took to

⁹⁰ Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.14.

⁹¹ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.171.

European sports and pastimes.⁹² In fact, as Turnbull recounts, a Straits Chinese Recreation Club was set up in 1885, 'offering facilities for tennis and billiards, and later on for cricket and hockey', and in 1911, the Straits Chinese Football association was formed.⁹³

At the same time, the colonial-influenced life-style of the Straits-born Chinese is also manifest in the houses of the community, and 'is the most conspicuous characteristic of the *Babas*' in their multi-cultural influence. For instance, it is common, Chia points out, for 'a nameplate in English, perhaps reading "Silver Lode Villa" ' to be erected at the gate of a Straits-born Chinese home, clearly indicating the central place that the English culture occupies in the family.⁹⁴ The typical layout of the mansion would also hint at colonial influences. The design of the edifice is such that the living room is adorned with European furniture, 'a Chippendale tea table with four high chairs, their tall arched backs and seats covered with embroidered upholstery' and 'a Swiss handmade clock, intricately carved and adorned with fancy semi-precious stones'.⁹⁵ By contrast however, the kitchen and bedrooms are equipped with Chinese fittings: '*kapok* wood table and chairs', an altar of the Chinese idol the Kitchen God at the corner, along with 'old-fashioned Chinese four-poster beds' in the bedrooms. On the one hand, the English ornaments in the home demonstrate the degree to which the Straits-born Chinese family has been anglicised by several decades of colonial contact. On the other, the Chinese furniture and decor of the kitchen and bedrooms suggest that the Straits-born Chinese continue to retain some aspects of their ancestral culture. The

⁹² C.M. Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p.102.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.28

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

decorative style and artifacts in the private residences of the Straits-born Chinese, Chia suggests, 'speak of the mixed cultural influence on the Babas', and encapsulate the culturally hybridised identity of the community. What this also illustrates is the "splitting" of the domestic subject into two or more compartments. The design of the house, as it is "split" into the Chinese and English style of decor, becomes a projection of the inhabitants' subjecthood, and epitomises both the English and the Straits-born influences in the life of the community. The hybrid space which the Straits-born Chinese occupy is therefore also a space where the differences between the Chinese and colonial cultures collide creatively in a way that best reflects the existence and identity of the community.

Yet, in spite of everything, the Straits-born Chinese continued to define and be defined by others as Chinese. Chia writes that 'the *Babas* are Chinese in spirit and tradition but Malay in form.'⁹⁶ This is because while they were integrated into the Malay and colonial cultures, they did not allow their English education and hybrid values completely to eclipse their Chinese identity. They continued to uphold certain Chinese ethnic features, albeit in a modified form. Most Straits-born Chinese, for example, continue to uphold the Chinese custom of counting one's birthday. They calculated their age according to the lunar calendar, and preferred to 'name the animal of the Chinese zodiac under which they were born'.⁹⁷ Thus, upon enquiry as to when he or she was born, a Straits-born Chinese would often use the animal year of birth, and perhaps reply that he or she was born in the year of the Dragon. According to the scholar Rudolph, the community was such that it adhered strictly to the customs and

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p.1.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p.117.

practices of the Chinese culture, and this was exemplified especially in various religious and ceremonial rituals. For example, in the marriage ceremonies of the Straits-born Chinese people, the bride would adorn the Ming-style of dress, the groom a Manchu-style, and the headdress of the bride appeared similar to the crown of the Ming empress.⁹⁸ Following the Chinese tradition, the marriage ceremony would also include certain religious rites such as the construction of a makeshift altar of the *sam kai* (Chinese God of Heaven, Earth and Man), which relatives of the bride and groom would worship with joss-sticks and offerings. The rituals of Straits-born Chinese weddings thus epitomise the influences of their ancestral culture; demonstrating that despite the community's hybrid identity, they are proud and conscious of their Chinese origins and would readily admit to an ancestral lineage descending from their forebears who had come directly from China.⁹⁹

In addition, the Straits-born Chinese adherence to and maintenance of their Chinese ancestral culture is further exemplified in their family home, where the *jee hoe* or house crest, displaying the surname and origins of the family, constitutes an integral part of the edifice. The *jee hoe* is hung above the doorway of the house and bears evidence that the family take pride in their Chinese heritage, and maintain a strong sense of family bonding, as reflected in their kinship ties that are steeped in Chinese origins. The Straits-borns' kinship bonds are such that 'their language has forms of address for up to seven hundred degrees and categories of relationship.'¹⁰⁰ This characteristic is reinforced by Chia, who describes their extensive kinship terms in

⁹⁸ Jurgen Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p.222.

⁹⁹ Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.3.

¹⁰⁰ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.170.

addressing even the most remote of relatives by rank.¹⁰¹ Thus, for instance, in a family of three male siblings, the eldest son would be known as *Ba Besar* (*Ba* being the Malay word for 'son' and *Besar* the Malay word for 'big'). The second son would be known as *Ba Tengah* (*Tengah* the Malay word for 'middle'), and the youngest as *Ba Chik* (*Chik* meaning 'small'). The same can be said of daughters and the rest of the family, where members are addressed not by personal names, but by their rank and seniority in the family. According to Chia, the Straits-borns' preoccupation with the Chinese belief in kinship ties and the Chinese style of designating relatives is so pronounced that there are quite easily 'thirty-odd forms of address' which the community would commonly use.¹⁰²

The Straits-born Chinese thus embody an identity that is culturally hybridised, both literally and metaphorically. That they have lost almost all their ancestral language and gained a separate lingua franca distinguishes them from the rest of the diaspora. What is also important is that they have managed to incorporate the indigenous Malay language and culture without necessarily losing their own sense of a Chinese identity. They epitomise a different kind of ethnicity that has evolved from close contacts with the indigenous and colonial cultures. It is an identity that represents a fusion of those various other cultures and one that has emerged from the socio-cultural demands of living in a culturally pluralistic society. It is possible, therefore, to construct a definition of the Straits-born Chinese: a person who is culturally, and at times biologically

¹⁰¹ Felix Chia, *op. cit.*, p.44. Chia gives a detailed analysis of the kinship system and terms of address used by the Straits-born Chinese.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p.42.

hybridised, and whose identity is derived partly from the Chinese, the colonial, and the Malay cultures.¹⁰³

The China-born Chinese.

Alongside the Straits-born Chinese, the early diaspora also consisted of a community of immigrants who came directly from China. These immigrants were known as the 'China-born Chinese',¹⁰⁴ a phrase used to distinguish them from the Straits-borns. During the early nineteenth century, when the first generation of Chinese immigrants arrived in the colony, the term *sinkeh* was also used at times to describe their status as 'new comers'.¹⁰⁵ As colonial expansion drew an increasing number of Chinese migrants to the colony by the 1880s, the appellation *sinkeh* became widely popularised, and was used pejoratively to signal the lower status of the Chinese migrant as compared to the rest of the community.¹⁰⁶ In the late 1890s, as James Francis asserts, about ninety percent of the community consisted of immigrant *sinkehs*, and only about ten percent were local born Chinese.

¹⁰³ The identity of the Straits-born Chinese is complex. It is therefore important to be mindful of the different levels of assimilation that have given rise to the identity of the Straits-born Chinese. The hybrid identity of the Straits-born Chinese is further discussed in Chapter Two.

¹⁰⁴ As with its common usage, the terms 'China-born Chinese' and its contracted form 'China-born' will be used synonymously throughout this thesis.

¹⁰⁵ Historians and writers of the diaspora usually use the generic term 'Chinese' to refer to the *sinkeh* or the *China-born Chinese*. The term *sinkeh* will be used in this thesis to refer to the Chinese who emigrated from China.

¹⁰⁶ It is difficult to determine when exactly the term *sinkeh* first evolved. However, it is likely that the term first came about during the late nineteenth century, between the 1850s and 1880s, when colonial administration drew more and more Chinese indentured coolies to the colony. I rely here on the research undertaken by Persia Crawford Campbell and James Francis on the early Chinese immigrants, which reveal that the term *sinkeh* was popularised towards the second half of the nineteenth century, at a time when the credit-ticket system of indentured labour further enabled the proliferation of Chinese immigrants to the colony. See Persia Crawford Campbell, *op. cit.* and James Francis, *op. cit.*

Sinkehs were not always well cared for during their stay in the colony and research into this diasporic group reveals the hardship that some of these immigrants face as new immigrants in the host country. In her study of the China-born coolie for instance, Pan reveals that the *sinkeh*, upon his arrival in the settlement of Singapore, ‘was a distinct figure, creature of another world, and it was no accident that special words were used to describe him, to set him apart - *sinkeh* (*Hokkien* for “new arrival”).’¹⁰⁷ Within the early diaspora, the term *sinkeh* was used with negative connotations to distinguish the China-born from the Straits-born. It is an expression not only of his peasant origins but of his immigrant status. Thus, the term *sinkeh* is a condescending name used to belittle the China-born subject; to imply that they are “aliens” and foreigners within the host society. Being a *sinkeh* is a stigma, and the ‘new arrival’ marks the boundary between the native, Straits-born Chinese and the immigrant, China-born Chinese. As Francis notes, the majority of *sinkehs* in 1881 came from ‘the lowest stratum of Chinese society in China, without skills or capital,’¹⁰⁸ and as such, were stigmatised not only by their immigrant status but by their impoverished backgrounds, especially during their stay in the early diaspora.

The term *sinkeh* therefore, sets the China-borns apart from the rest of the diaspora, as well as designating their origins and period of arrival. Historical records suggest that the first China-born immigrants arrived at the settlement of Singapore in 1821. Their arrival gave rise to a predominant pattern of migration called the ‘coolie pattern’, a term that originates from the name of an aboriginal Gujerat tribe in India,

¹⁰⁷ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.107.

¹⁰⁸ James Francis, *op. cit.*, p.15.

and was extended to mean a labourer,¹⁰⁹ menial worker or house servant. The migrant from China was generally a male coolie, an unskilled labourer of peasant origin who was poor and landless,¹¹⁰ and formed the core of the lower social class of the diasporic community. Thus, numerous historical and sociological accounts of the diaspora shed light on the experiences of the Chinese coolie, and provide an insight into the life of the early immigrant. The historian Tregonning for instance, describes the often perilous journey of the China-born Chinese to Malaya:

when the annual arrivals of *Sinkehs* rose, the labour trade was under no supervision at all, and the abuses grew steadily worse. These abuses, the inhumanity of what became virtual slavery, began in China in the actual recruitment of the labourer. He represented a saleable commodity, ... The abuses continued on the journey, as the heavy junks, with hatches battened down, staggered south through the north-east monsoon. They were 'hell ships', for as the master's main interest was to import as many Chinese as possible, it was not uncommon for 1400 men or more to be crowded into 800 ton junks, where they lived or died under appalling conditions.¹¹¹

The above account speaks of the coolie trade during the nineteenth century and presents a brutal picture of the Chinese immigrants' journey from their homeland in China to Singapore. The shipper or 'master' treats the *sinkehs* as 'saleable commodities' and 'human cargoes', clearly operating an unregulated and abusive

¹⁰⁹ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.45.

¹¹⁰ Wang Gungwu, *China and the Overseas Chinese*, p.6. For more on the subject of coolie emigration read Persia Crawford Campbell, *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries within the British Empire*, London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1971, and George L. Hicks (ed.), 'Chinese Emigration Patterns' in *Overseas Chinese Remittances from Southeast Asia 1910-1940*, Singapore: Select Books, 1993, pp.3-19. Wang, Campbell, and Hicks have all written about the nineteenth century China-born Chinese migrant. It is important to note here, Hicks suggests, that while the majority of the China-born Chinese migrants were labourers from the lower classes, there were also some, albeit a minority, who migrated by their own financial means or through financial assistance from their family, and who made a living not as coolies, but as merchants and entrepreneurs in the diaspora. George L. Hicks, *op. cit.*, pp.13-14.

¹¹¹ K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.127.

labour system.¹¹² Crawford Campbell suggests that these *sinkehs* who were recruited from China were often also indentured in the sense that they were bound by contract to an 'external party' who had paid for the cost of their passages in advance, and to which they therefore owed their services.¹¹³ However, the striking part of Tregonning's account is not just the system of coolie recruitment, but the deplorable conditions of the vessel. The over-crowding on the Chinese junks is appalling, for it is obvious that the more people the shipper could cram into the craft, the greater his profit. The *sinkehs* were thus treated like cattle, whereby '1400 men or more' are herded into '800 ton junks'. Presumably, provisions for them are also spare, as there were those who 'died under appalling conditions'. The coolies are treated like import and export commodities, barely human beings, as they are sold and traded for a profit. It is clear from such accounts of the China-born coolie's initial passage to Singapore that during the nineteenth century, the labour trade or system of coolie migration was subject to immeasurable abuse.

Indeed, as with Tregonning's and Campbell's study of the *sinkehs*' experiences, nineteenth century accounts about the indentured system of labour also depict a similar picture. In an essay published in 1899 for instance, a local writer exposes the 'evil effects' of the coolie system and makes known the extent to which passenger brokers of the early diaspora exploit the immigrants. This was illustrated by the fact that

¹¹² Campbell's study of the Chinese coolies suggests that the coolies were graded into two classes: the 'paying' and 'non-paying' passengers. The former were persons whose passage had been paid for in advance. On arrival in port, these 'paying passengers' were free to go ashore. The latter were persons whose passage had been given on credit, usually by the headman of the vessel or by agencies which dealt with the recruitment of coolies. On arrival, these 'non-paying passengers' were detained on the vessels until their services were engaged.

¹¹³ Depending on the situation, the 'external party' here could mean the shipper (or 'recruiter-courier' as Hicks suggests), the agency or trading company which deals with the recruitment of indentured

passengers had to pay '\$8 to \$9 for each ticket', 'while ship owners or agents received '\$4 to \$5 for each adult ticket', and brokers received the difference.¹¹⁴ Similarly, contemporary research published on early Chinese migration also reinforces the exploitative terms of the coolie indentured system. According to Campbell, it was probable that in 1876, the total cost of recruitment and passage money approximated to \$13 or \$14. This sum was paid by employers on behalf of the coolie, on the understanding that the latter would repay the sum in a minimum period of six months; during which time, the *sinkeh* would receive only food and clothing, and was under the obligation of repaying not only the legitimate costs of his passage to the colony but the large competitive profits gained by the brokers and the agents involved.¹¹⁵ Within this context, Tregonning's work on the China-born coolies also exposes another side to their exploitation.¹¹⁶ His account reveals the operation of a system of slave labour which exploits not only males but also females. These female victims were known as *mui tsais*, who were 'young girls sold to families as domestic servants.'¹¹⁷ The girls would be taken to live into another family, with obligations on the part of the buyers to clothe and feed the girl. However, as Tregonning writes, 'these conditions often did not prevail in Malaya, and the poor child was virtually a slave.'¹¹⁸

workers, or a private individual who provides the cost of the coolie's passage. For more on the subject read Persia Crawford Campbell, *op. cit.* and George L. Hicks, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴ By a Straits Chinese, 'Local Chinese Social Organisations' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.3 No.10, June 1899, p.45.

¹¹⁵ Persia Crawford Campbell, *op. cit.*, p.5.

¹¹⁶ K.G. Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.256.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* These *mui tsais* were also commonly referred to as 'bondswomen'. During their stay in the diaspora, many of these *mui tsai* were known to suffer physical and sexual abuse. Some were also groomed to become concubines to their masters. There have been numerous fictional narratives of the *mui tsais*. Writers such as Yeap Joo Kim, Janet Lim, Catherine Lim, and Suchen Christine Lim have all produced literary accounts of the life experiences of bondswomen, and the social reality of their lives in the colony. The texts bring to light the gender discriminations that female immigrants were subject to. See for example Catherine Lim, *The Bondswoman*, Singapore: Catherine Lim Publishing, 1995; Janet Lim, *Sold for Silver*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1958; Suchen Christine Lim, *Fistful of Colours*, Singapore: EPB Publishers, 1993.

Throughout the nineteenth century in the early diaspora, successive waves of China-born immigrants provided a continual supply of new coolies. Their population increased to the extent that by the 1880s, the streams of coolie immigrants into Singapore led to what Pan terms as the boom 'coolie town'.¹¹⁹ Records show that by 1881, these immigrants from China had formed the majority of the early diaspora, making up 90.5 percent of the Chinese community in Singapore. The Straits-born Chinese made up the remaining 9.5 percent.¹²⁰ Historical accounts suggest that the presence of a British trading post in the settlement stimulated the migration of coolies. The commerce and infrastructure brought about by the British generated the demands for labour, and immigrants congregated to the colony. According to Pan, British colonisation was a period when 'tides of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia were given their strongest impetus.'¹²¹ There were, however, other political and economic factors that precipitated the migration of China-born Chinese to the settlement, and which were significant in determining the "push and pull" logic of immigrant flows from China.

Political upheavals in China were a cause for the outflow of Chinese from their homeland, and many China-borns migrated to escape political problems at home. Historical records show that in 1644, the Ming government in China fell to invaders - the Manchus.¹²² The Manchus were a nomadic people, and a different "race" from the Han Chinese, who constituted the majority of China's population.¹²³ The fall of the

¹¹⁹ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.110.

¹²⁰ See Appendix 1.

¹²¹ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.9.

¹²² *ibid.*, p.7.

¹²³ Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.xix.

Ming dynasty induced the emigration of Ming loyalists by the thousands to sanctuaries in Malaya and Southeast Asia. Resistance against the Manchu government was prevalent all over China, but was stronger in the central and south parts.¹²⁴ The reason for this, Yen alleges, is that a particularly large number of inhabitants in the provinces of central and South China were massacred by the Manchu conquerors.¹²⁵ Such political unrest was aggravated with the arrival of the anti-Manchu pirate Kongxinga, on the southern coasts of China. The son of a Japanese mother and a Chinese trader from Fukien, Koxinga was a key revolutionary in the anti-Manchu campaign. In the course of his revolution, he landed on the coasts of Fukien to replenish his stores but more importantly, to claim an alliance with the population of the region. As a result, the Manchu government cut off supplies to Koxinga in a bid to break his resistance and force the Fukien people to forsake a part of their territory on the coasts of Kwangtung and Fukien, from where a large proportion of the China-born Chinese immigrants originated. Many of them who were victims of this political rife left to make a new life abroad. Political unrest and the cruel treatment of the Chinese by the Manchus thus resulted in the flight of many southern migrants to Singapore and other sanctuaries overseas.

Social and natural upheavals in China were also responsible for the migration of the China-born Chinese. For example, the stress of overcrowding was one factor that led many of them to leave China. As Campbell suggests, 'the impoverishment of Southern China during the nineteenth century pressed heavily on the toiling villagers and there was probably little difficulty in collecting small bands of volunteer

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p. xviii.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p. xix.

emigrants.¹²⁶ Lynn Pan also states that many China-born Chinese migrated because of over-population and the scarcity of fertile land.¹²⁷ Unsettled conditions in the South China provinces, unemployment, famines, and floods, compelled many of the inhabitants to emigrate by force of circumstances rather than voluntarily. This was especially true in the provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien,¹²⁸ where the impoverishment and dire living conditions of the villages took their toll,¹²⁹ possibly due to the fact that South China had a larger population compared to North China. These neighbouring provinces in particular were known to send migrants abroad. Fukien is a mountainous region with insufficient fertile land for intensive agricultural production, and it was this unreliability of agricultural crops that made it difficult for subsistence and thus provided an impetus for emigration. For the reasons described above, most of the China-born Chinese who arrived in the settlement during the early diaspora were usually coolies of peasant origins, who migrated to escape the harsh conditions in their homeland.

This section has provided a brief review of the fundamental differences between the two diasporic groups. It has also outlined a history of the China-born Chinese and the Straits-borns, looking at their cultural formation and the circumstances of their arrival to the early diaspora. This historical context is important in order for us to better understand the divisions in the Chinese community. Other disparities between the two groups, especially in relation to their perceptions of “home” and identity, will go on to reveal that despite their significant differences, the division between the two

¹²⁶ Persia Crawford Campbell, *op. cit.*, p.3.

¹²⁷ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.13.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p.12.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, p.44.

Chinese enclaves is not always clear. This is evident from a lecture delivered by Song Ong Siang in 1897 and published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*:

When a little while ago I read this essay to the Chinese Philomatic Society, it was pointedly suggested that the distinction between the Straits-born Chinese and the immigrant Chinese has been too nicely drawn and that there is frequent intermarriage between these two sections of the Chinese community, and that excess of the Nyonyas over the Babas is an advantage as it gives the immigrant Chinese an opportunity of finding his wife and of settling down here.¹³⁰

The above document suggests, initially at least, a distinction between the Straits-born and China-born Chinese. The hope is that the social conditions, especially in relation to the female population, will allow this distinction to fade. What this also indicates is that intermarriage between the communities was not uncommon during the nineteenth century.¹³¹ Chapter Two shows that the boundaries between the two groups eventually became blurred with the gradual admission of the China-borns into the Straits-born community, and the changes that eventually led to this process of assimilation were more apparent towards the end of the nineteenth century. As many successful China-born Chinese settled down permanently in the diaspora, they became absorbed into the local community. This was the case especially if the former married into a Straits Chinese family, or adopted the practices of the latter.¹³² It can also be argued that the

¹³⁰ Song Ong Siang, *op. cit.*, p.21.

¹³¹ In her book *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, Pan has argued that 'in later times the *Babas* were always to marry other *Babas* or new immigrants from China' (p.169) This reinforces the fact that intermarriages between the Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese did undoubtedly take place. This process of assimilation is significant to the development of the early diaspora, because it indicates that the boundary between the Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese eventually gave way as the China-born Chinese merged with the Straits-born Chinese community. The process and consequences of this assimilation will be examined at length in Chapter Two. It will suffice at this point to note that the division between the two diasporic groups is by no means fixed or permanent.

¹³² G. William Skinner, *op. cit.*, p.63. Skinner argues that the usual means for assimilating China-born immigrants into the Straits-born Chinese community was through uxorilocal marriages, whereby the male China-born immigrant moves as a son-in-law into the Straits-born Chinese family.

assimilation of China-borns into the local Straits Chinese community complicates the earlier, rudimentary division between the two diasporic groups.

The Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese under Colonial Rule.

The task of historicising the early diaspora also entails an exploration of the regime of power that is inscribed in its formation. It is thus important, for the purpose of this analysis, to distinguish between the Straits-born Chinese and the China-born Chinese, and the ways in which they are represented in colonial discourses. To that extent, this section will examine *what it meant for the two diasporic groups to live under British domination in the early diaspora*. What are the relations of power that operate within the space of the diasporic community? How do they work to differentiate the Straits Chinese from the China-born? In what ways were the two communities relationally positioned in the colony in which they resided? How were they constituted through a variety of discourses and colonial practices? These questions are central to the formation of the early diaspora, and the discussion that follows will attempt to give an account of the relationship between the colonial government and the two diasporic communities. This section also studies the differing and competing narrative accounts of the early diaspora by European historians and colonial officials during the nineteenth century. It looks at representations of the Chinese community in colonial discourses, and challenges their claims to authority and objectivity.¹³³

¹³³ Post-structuralists have challenged historians for their claims over the 'purity' of their narratives. This is reflected, for instance, in Roland Barthes' study of discursive rules and structures, and Foucault's discourse theory. They emphasise the need to interrogate the ideological assumptions of historical discourses. Historiographer Michel De Certeau also emphasises the ways in which language valorises our sense of history. His work uncovers the linguistic and intertextual relations which govern

Representations of the Colony and the Two Diasporic Groups.

The growth of the Chinese community during the nineteenth century was generated by the British authorities to meet the demands of modernisation and rapid economic development. This is reflected in the historical accounts of how the early diaspora capitalised on the colonialists' aims of modernisation, and its role in such a project. These historical narratives adhere to the Orientalist assertion that Western modernity brought about by the colonial government was necessary and desirable for the colony, as revealed in the document below:

Praise of the Chinese is usually limited to a stereotyped concession to their business qualities and their industry. The fact is without them Malaya would still be more or less as it was over most of its extent eighty years ago - a few clearings along the coasts and up the rivers, in the midst of jungle and swamp with no roads, no bridges, no public buildings, no hospitals, no schools, and no courts of law.¹³⁴

In the extract above, no distinction whatsoever is made between the Straits-borns and the China-borns, as the term 'Chinese' is used generically to refer to the community as a whole. The narrative voice purports to present a favourable impression of the diaspora that goes beyond the stereotype image of an industrious people. Yet, it does

historical discourses. Within the field of post-colonial studies, Edward Said examines colonial texts and their representation of the Other. Said's research builds on Foucault's theory of discourse and alerts us to the systems of knowledge enforced by imperialism. The writings of Said, Foucault, and Certeau remind us that the treatment of the diaspora's past - what the historian makes of history - is shaped by discourse. For more on the subject see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Sheridan Smith trans., London: Tavistock, 1972; Sara Mills, *Discourse*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978; Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse of the Other*, Brian Massumi (trans.), London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

¹³⁴ Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya*, London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1948, p.vii.

so by positing certain fictitious “truths” about them. The narrator argues that the modernisation of Malaya has been inevitable and legitimate. The Chinese people are perceived to be indispensable in their contribution to the project of modernisation, for without them, as the narrator says, ‘Malaya would still be more or less as it was ... a few clearings along the coasts and up the rivers.’ Infrastructures such as ‘schools’, ‘bridges’, ‘roads’, and ‘public buildings’ are perceived as markers of a modern society, and the Chinese people living in the settlement are assumed to be “better off” with these amenities.

The narrative above exemplifies the type of colonial discourse produced by colonial officials and European scholars over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹³⁵ The discourse can be said to reinforce certain underlying assumptions about the diasporic Chinese, where the diaspora is perceived as an aid to modernity rather than as a society functioning on its own terms. The image of the Chinese as an enterprising and industrious people is perpetuated, and what emerges instead is the assumption that they have brought about Western modernity, and that modernity is unquestionably desirable. Indeed, throughout the period of colonial rule, the colonial government perceived both the Straits-borns and the China-borns as essential to its project of modernisation and economic advancement. Stamford Raffles, for instance, spoke of the two groups collectively as ‘that industrious race’, and emphasised their role as the single largest community in the colony. This is revealed in his address to a committee of Europeans in 1854, ‘[f]rom the number of Chinese already settled, and the peculiar attractions of the place for that industrious race, it may be presumed that

they will always form by far the largest part of the community.’¹³⁶ In his account, no distinction whatsoever is made between the Straits-born Chinese and the China-born immigrants. Rather, Raffles makes a general statement about the supposed character of the two communities, regarding them as one ‘industrious race’,¹³⁷ and this collapses the distinction between the two groups only serves to conceal the cultural complexity of the diaspora and reduce it to a few adjectives. At the same time, Raffles’ attitude towards and perception of the diasporic community reflect the colonial power’s larger purpose in the settlement, which was to propagate the image of the Chinese as an industrious race, and to encourage the growth of the early diaspora.

The British authorities played a significant role in propagating the industrious image of its diasporic subjects. This is reinforced in the narrative accounts of colonial officials during the nineteenth century, which offer insights into how the colonial government perceived the Chinese community, as well as how they sustained the growth of the diaspora for the purpose of capitalist expansion. In an essay published in 1897 in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, C.W.S Kynnersley, a British official, used the symbol of a ‘golden chersonese’ to describe the colony,¹³⁸ providing an image of the settlement that connotes wealth and economic opportunities. In this case, Kynnersley’s

¹³⁵ By ‘discourse’ I am referring to the complex socio-cultural and ideological context which defines and produces the identity of the Chinese diaspora, and which builds upon certain underlying assumptions and concepts about the Chinese people.

¹³⁶ Stamford Raffles, ‘Notices of Singapore’ in *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, Vol. viii, 1854, p.105.

¹³⁷ This section will soon reveal that an inherent paradox in colonial narratives appears to be that the British government were on the one hand eager to differentiate between the Straits-born Chinese and the China-born Chinese by regarding the former as British subjects, but were also keen to present them as a united, industrious race on the other.

¹³⁸ C.W.S Kynnersley, ‘The Prevention and Repression of Crime’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 3, Sept. 1897, p.76.

rhetoric seems to be written in an effort to make the colony appear more profitable, and to encourage the migration of Chinese immigrants to the settlement.

There is also further evidence to suggest that the British government perceived the China-born Chinese as essential to their project of colonial expansion. This is revealed in an official report written by the colonial governor Francis Light, who worked in Penang in the eighteenth century. This is how Light writes of the China-borns:

The Chinese constitute the most valuable part of our inhabitants; ... They are the only people of the east from whom a revenue may be raised without expense and extraordinary efforts of government. They are a valuable acquisition, but speaking a language which no other people understand, they are able to form parties and combinations in the most secret manner against any regulations of government which they disapprove, and were they brave as intelligent they would be dangerous subjects, but their want of courage will make them bear many impositions before rebel. They are indefatigable in the pursuit of money, ... They don't wait until they have acquired a large fortune to return to their native country, but send annually a part of their profits to their families.¹³⁹

Light uses the generic term 'Chinese' in the first sentence. However, towards the end of his report, he refers to the 'Chinese' as those who 'have acquired a large fortune to return to their native country' and those who remit money to China. This suggests that Light is referring specifically to the China-born section of the diaspora. The narrative is an important document because it suggests that these diasporic subjects are perceived not only as capable of being subversive but also as allies by the colonial government. On the one hand, Light conveys his pleasure when he describes the China-born Chinese as being 'the most valuable part of the inhabitants'. This comment suggests that he is

aware that these migrants are economically necessary to meet the demands for manpower created by colonial expansion, and he values them for the revenue that they generate. On the other hand, Light conveys his apprehensions when he suggests that the China-born Chinese can be potentially 'dangerous subjects'. This implies that he is suspicious of them and perceives them as possible threats to the colonial order. What is apparent from the narrative, therefore, is that it reflects the insecurities and uneasiness of the colonial government when confronted with the unknown Other - the China-born Chinese. What is also evident is that Light regards their docility as a virtue to the colonial regime. He attempts to allay the insecurities of the colonial government by reinforcing the stereotype of racial cowardice and the China-borns' 'want of courage'.

Light's perception of the China-born community reinforces the views of the British official Kynnersley, who perceives them in similar terms. In their individual ways, the two officials express the same wish to present the China-born Chinese as an industrious people. In his account of the early diaspora, Kynnersley does not hesitate to portray their image as a 'hardworking energetic race' who 'so long as they were physically fit, ... have no difficulty in earning a livelihood.'¹⁴⁰ He also adds that their reason for emigrating from China was 'almost invariably want or political necessity', and that they migrated to the colony 'for the sole purpose of accumulating money.'¹⁴¹ This supports the colonial government's impression of the community as a hardworking and mobile race, and these narrative accounts demonstrate how the British government employed the migration of China-born Chinese for the purpose of building its colony.

¹³⁹ Francis Light, 'Notices of Pinang' in *Journal of Indian Archipelago*, 1850, p.9.

¹⁴⁰ C.W.S Kynnersley, *op. cit.*, p.76.

Indeed, from the 1850s onwards until the 1950s,¹⁴² the British government encouraged the mass movement of China-born Chinese to serve their economic ends. As Raffles says, the British's purpose for the colony 'is not territory but trade; a great commercial emporium',¹⁴³ and the primary objective of the British was to stimulate migration and increase the importance of Singapore as a trading settlement. It is clear that during the period, the colonial government actively sought to attract an increasing number of Chinese migrants to the settlement and it was 'immigration that contributed to Singapore's growth and success.'¹⁴⁴ Such was also the case for the rest of the other races, who had played as important a part in the development of the colony. During the 1850s, the colonial authorities simultaneously motivated the relocation of Indian and Malay migrants to the settlement, albeit for different purposes. The immigration of South Indian labourers from India, for instance, was encouraged by the colonial authorities as it provided the colony with a steady supply of cheap labour for public works.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, these South Indians were generally Muslims, and merged easily with the Malay population which was of the same religion. At the same time, the Malay community as Turnbull suggests, had also continued to expand, and immigrants of varied races from Malacca, Sumatra and the Riau archipelago mingled easily and unobtrusively with the existing population.¹⁴⁶ From the perspective of the colonial government, there was a general contentment towards the disparate communities in the

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, pp.168-169. Wang gives an account of the migration of Chinese immigrants to the British colonies in Southeast Asia since the 1800s until the early twentieth century. He explores the movement of Chinese immigrants during the period and delineates four main patterns of migration: the trader pattern, the coolie pattern, the sojourner pattern, and the descent or re-migrant pattern. see pp.4-19.

¹⁴³ Stamford Raffles, quoted in C.M. Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p.20.

¹⁴⁴ C.M. Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p.56.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

colony, who proved to be industrious immigrants and, as Tregonning states, the European and British community alike were 'devoted to making money', and 'all appreciated the unrestricted immigration of labour.'¹⁴⁷

To an extent, the flow of migrants to the settlement of Singapore during the colonial period can be seen, for example, in relation to the dispersion of the Indian peoples, and to the emergence of what Vijay Mishra terms as the 'older diasporas of classic capitalism'.¹⁴⁸ Mishra argues that 'older diasporas' were usually a consequence of the colonisation of territories during the nineteenth century, and the Indian diaspora during the 1900s began as part of the British imperial movement of labour to settler-colonies. Similarly, the early Chinese diaspora developed as a function of a colonial capitalism that produced the massive demand for workers in the colony. This augmentation of the diasporic population due to colonial expansion explains why the English, as Wang Gungwu says, 'did not hesitate to engage [the China-borns] to help their expansion of trading activities in the Archipelago during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.'¹⁴⁹ In fact, the China-born Chinese, and indeed the rest of the

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p.37.

¹⁴⁷ Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p.114.

¹⁴⁸ Vijay Mishra distinguishes between two Indian diasporas, which he refers to as the old ('exclusive') and the new ('border'). He argues that there is a 'radical break' between the older diasporas of classic capitalism and the mid-late twentieth century diasporas of advanced capital to the metropolitan centres of the Empire, the New World. According to Mishra, the old 'exclusive' diaspora was the result of the colonisation of territories such as Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana, and South Africa; colonies which saw the demand for labour. The new 'border' diasporas, on the other hand, are partly the result of a post-modern capitalist regime that is based on the transnational flow of capital and labour. Mishra supplements his theory by delineating writers of the old and new diaspora. According to Mishra, V.S. Naipaul, for instance, would belong to the former, while others such as Salman Rushdie, Meera Nair, and Meera Syal belong to the latter. For more on the subject, see Vijay Mishra, 'The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorising the Indian Diaspora' in *Textual Practice* 10(3), 1996, pp.421-447.

¹⁴⁹ Wang Gungwu, 'Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia', in Anthony Reid (ed.), *Sojourners and Settlers*, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1996, p.6.

other ethnic communities, were actively welcomed to the settlements following the British acquisition of Penang, in 1786, and Singapore, in 1819.¹⁵⁰

It is therefore evident that during the nineteenth century, the colonial government's main concern was to increase the number of Chinese immigrants to the diaspora, and thereby raise the importance of the colony as a trading settlement. This was also demonstrated through the colonial government's efforts at shaping a class hierarchy within the diaspora as a whole, where the social structure was established in accordance with a Western capitalist logic. The migration of China-born Chinese, and indeed Straits Chinese, to the colony, as we shall soon see, resulted in part from such efforts at the formation of this social hierarchy.

Within the framework of colonial domination, Western modernity brought the early diaspora into close proximity with a capitalist culture. Consistent with the capitalist logic that places surplus value as a determinant, the colonial government helped to create a social hierarchy within the diasporic community. This is reflected in Raffles' instructions to his committee of Europeans in 1854:

A line must be drawn between the classes engaged in mercantile speculation and those gaining their livelihood by handicrafts and personal labour; the former, and particularly the principal merchants, will require the first attention, and there does not appear any reason why the latter should in any instance be allowed to occupy those situations which are likely at any time to be required by the commercial community. The cultivators form a third and interesting class, particularly of the Chinese population, but as no part of the ground intended to be occupied as the town can be spared for

¹⁵⁰ Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas*, p. 24.

agricultural purposes they will not fall under your consideration, except in as far as it may be necessary to exclude them.¹⁵¹

The above document reveals Raffles' intentions for the organisation of the colony as well as reflecting his concern with class relations in the settlement. He segregates the Chinese according to their economic roles in the diaspora. This could be seen as a strategy designed to re-structure the community as a whole, in order to encourage the participation of both the Straits-borns and China-borns in the colonial project of economic advancement. According to the plan laid down by Raffles in 1854, it is apparent that his main concern is for the traders and merchants, which is in line with the aims of the British government to strengthen the colony's commerce and trade. The narrative reveals a colonial-capitalist consciousness based on the desire to make profit through the encouragement of trade, and this is reflected through Raffles' ideas about the value of the merchant class compared with the other classes.

The impact of such a colonial policy of social restructuring on the population and communities of the early diaspora is that by prioritising the 'principal merchants', Raffles places a greater value on the mercantile class, while those who earn a living by handicrafts and labour are relegated to a lower class. Raffles was circumspect of what he perceives as the 'general interests' of 'different classes of inhabitants of which the society will be composed', and emphasised the social distinctions in the communities under his control.¹⁵² Within this structure, the Malay population for instance, were generally industrious immigrants employed in what were deemed less important mercantile occupations such as small-scale subsistence farming or fishing, and in 1854,

¹⁵¹ Stamford Raffles, *op. cit.*, p.102.

¹⁵² *ibid.*, p.101.

as Raffles comments, 'the importance of concentrating the different classes of the population in their separate quarters' meant that the 'Malay population being principally attach[ed] to the Tumungong or engaged in fishing may not require any very extensive allotment.'¹⁵³ The Malays were thus allocated a piece of land known as 'Kampong Glam', and this area was, significantly, a fifty-acre site on the eastern side of the island and 'on the outskirts of town'.¹⁵⁴ The Chinese community, on the other hand, was settled near the Singapore river, which constituted the heart of town. The east bank of the river 'was reserved for the government and European community', the west bank the commercial centre, and behind the commercial centre 'the Chinese part of the town', while the Indians who were predominantly petty traders and merchants were allotted land slightly up-river.¹⁵⁵ The fact that the area of land allocated to the different communities was dependent on their general interests and occupations adhered to the colonial policy of social restructuring, and this clearly reflected the aims of the British government during the nineteenth century. The primary objective of the colonial authorities was to place emphasis on the merchant class, and, as Raffles writes, 'to secure the mercantile community all the facilities which the natural advantages of the port afford.'¹⁵⁶

To a large extent, the capitalist structuring of the colony could be perceived as a strategy undertaken by the colonial government to encourage the migration of immigrants from China, for whom such social mobility was difficult to achieve in the pre-capitalist social arrangement of their natal land. The traditional order of classes in

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, p.108.

¹⁵⁴ C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867, op. cit.*, p.37.

¹⁵⁵ C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867, op. cit.*, p.36.

¹⁵⁶ Stamford Raffles, *op. cit.*, p.102.

China placed scholars first, farmers second, artisans third, and merchants fourth.¹⁵⁷ The merchant class in such a structure had to struggle against a Confucius-based hierarchy that placed them at the bottom of the social scale; a form of social structuring which puts emphasis on the acquiring of knowledge and academic achievements. This four-tier social structure which ranked the scholar highest was, as Wang suggests, 'unique to China.'¹⁵⁸ In the diaspora, however, wealth took precedence and was the main determinant of social mobility. The merchants, or in fact anyone who succeeded in making their fortunes, could quickly ascend the social classes and be considered socially superior. According to Yen Ching Hwang, the diaspora during the nineteenth century could be divided into a "pyramid" of three stratas; the upper, the middle, and the lower social group:

The upper social group was comprised mainly of the wealthiest merchants, such as import and export merchants, bankers, shipping company proprietors, owners of big agency houses, tin-miners, gambier and pepper planters, opium farmers and liquor distillers. The middle social group was composed of shop keepers, retailers, petty traders, clerks, shop-assistants, artisans, craftsmen, tailors and mechanics. The lower social group, which formed the broad base of the pyramid, was made up of tin-mine workers, employees of gambier, pepper and rubber plantations, domestic servants, rickshaw pullers and hawkers.¹⁵⁹

The social structure of the societies in China and in the diasporic community were therefore distinctly different in their order of classes. The class hierarchy in the latter,

¹⁵⁷ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.183. Wang offers a detailed analysis of the merchant culture in China in the same chapter. Allen J. Chun has also researched the order of classes in traditional Chinese society. For the Chinese, Chun argues, 'the commercial pursuit of wealth in general was never a respectable livelihood in traditional Confucian society, occupying the bottom rung of an ideal social hierarchy which was to be preceded by the scholarly literati, peasantry, and the artisan class, respectively' (p.234). Allen J. Chun, 'Pariah Capitalism and the Overseas Chinese of Southeast Asia: Problems in the Definition of the Problem' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol.12 No.2, April 1989, pp.233-256.

¹⁵⁸ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.183.

¹⁵⁹ Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.10.

which placed wealth as a primary determinant, enabled many Straits-borns and China-borns to climb the social ladder as long as they were willing to work hard. In theory, at least, all those who were willing to work hard had a chance to ascend the social 'pyramid' and improve their social status.

The privileging of the merchants within the diasporic community is a clear example of a restructuring of class relations according to the capitalist logic. Such a hierarchy suggests the extent to which a pre-capitalist social arrangement in China had given way to a form of capitalist restructuring of the social order within the diaspora. It also suggests the degree to which the Chinese community as a whole had adapted or assimilated to a larger Western-colonial environment. At the same time, an important observation is that while there exists a hierarchy of classes with proletarian and bourgeois elements, occupational mobility can alter the diaspora's profile.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, this shows that the social structure of the early diaspora could never be homogeneous or permanent, and thus there is also a possibility that the profile of the overall community can change over time as a consequence of occupational and class mobility, especially when the old structures of social ordering have been dismantled.

It is therefore interesting, as Cohen suggests, to learn that historically, merchants and traders were almost totally subordinate to the mandarin scholar.¹⁶¹ The capitalist social structure of the diaspora proved especially attractive for the China-born Chinese, and it provided ample opportunities for anyone hardworking enough to

¹⁶⁰ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, London: UCL Press, 1997, p.24 Apart from the Chinese model, another instance of this can be seen through Cohen's analysis of the Poles and Italians of interwar France, who started off with predominantly low-paying jobs but have since increasingly joined the mainstream of society.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, p.83.

amass his or her fortune, thereby improving the individual's social status. Those in the community who could resist the 'social evils' of gambling, drinking and opium smoking were clearly in a better position to accumulate their wealth. Upward mobility within the diaspora thus generally depended on 'a combination of three factors: talent, good connections, and a capacity to resist temptation.'¹⁶² Such social mobility was difficult to achieve in the homeland in China, where the major determinant of success was scholarly knowledge, and merchants or traders were almost totally subordinate to the mandarin scholars.¹⁶³ It is therefore not difficult to conceive how, and in what ways, the re-arranging of the diaspora according to a capitalist logic provided yet another impetus for the migration of China-born subjects to the colony.

Furthermore, in accordance with their aims to sustain the growth of the diaspora and thereby enhance the economic position of the colony, the colonial officials sought to demonstrate that the British government was capable of efficient and benevolent rule. This is revealed in a lecture delivered by G.T. Hare in 1897 and later published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*:

In China, as you know well, Chinese citizens do not exist. The Chinese people are constitutionally slaves. They have no political rights and very few privileges as citizens. ... All the Chinese rich and poor, that come to this colony from China, have suffered from the effects of this system ... They cannot realise (till they have lived here many years) a different state of things.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.11.

¹⁶³ Robin Cohen, *op. cit.*, p.85.

¹⁶⁴ G.T. Hare, 'The Straits-born Chinese' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.1 No. 1, March 1897, p.4.

The excerpt from Hare's lecture above is addressed to the China-born Chinese. He attempts to persuade them of the fortunate life of the Chinese in Singapore as opposed to the life of those left behind in the natal state. Thus, in the narrative, Hare seems to take a keen interest in their welfare. He implies that the government in 'China is oppressive, and that they are subjects of a repressive regime. The word 'slave' conjures up an image of a powerless and suppressed people. China is "demonised" as a communist country, the Chinese government is made to look dictatorial, and those who remain in the natal state are perceived as subjects under a dictatorship. Hare perceives the China-borns as a persecuted people who are without rights and without a voice. On these grounds, he encourages their migration as a political necessity. At the same time, the phrase 'a different state of things' in the passage above refers to the colonial government, which Hare perceives as being more benevolent than the authorities in China. He portrays the British authorities in a positive light in view of their efforts to provide a place of refuge for the China-born Chinese. His lecture, therefore, can be seen as implying that as more immigrants from China arrived in the settlement, especially from the poor and dispossessed classes, migration can be seen as the benevolent reception of the desperate and the homeless by the colonial government.

For the China-born Chinese, however, their loyalty was neither to the colonial power nor to the host settlement. Rather, they were loyal to the thriving mercantile trade, not caring much whether the British, Portuguese, or French were in charge of the political structure.¹⁶⁵ The loyalty of the China-born Chinese is grounded in what

¹⁶⁵ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.170.

Wang perceives as 'benevolent paternalism',¹⁶⁶ to the political principle of law and rational bureaucracy, and to capitalism and modernity. This is perhaps because their aims revolved around commerce and trade, and this could only benefit the British in their commercial activities and capitalist expansion. Most of the China-borns, as Turnbull suggests, 'planned to make enough money to return to China after three or four years.'¹⁶⁷ Thus, in the early diaspora, the China-born Chinese established themselves as a self-regulating entity without any permanent loyalty to the existing political regime. They were left on their own in their ethnic enclaves, and dealt with the imperial power only vis-a-vis their community leaders and headmen,¹⁶⁸ or via the Straits Chinese, who were in closer contact with the British administrators. It has been recorded that 'a British or French flag meant different things to different people, but to many a Chinese emigrant it connoted trade, protection, and a pressing demand for his services.'¹⁶⁹ The real affinity of the China-born Chinese was to their homeland; more specifically, to their homeland as a place where their family were, to 'their business linked with their kinship groups and their villages back in China'.¹⁷⁰ This is revealed in an interview with Lew Yuk Lin, the Acting Consul for China at Singapore at that time, and which was published in 1898 in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*. During the discussion, Lew focused on 'several matters pertaining to China',¹⁷¹ during which he explained the position of the Chinese government on matters relating to its citizens residing abroad, ' "[n]o matter how intelligent a people the Chinese may be, no progress can be made if the Government does not give any protection to its people ...

¹⁶⁶ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.136.

¹⁶⁷ C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867, op. cit.*, p.36.

¹⁶⁸ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.117.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p.30.

¹⁷⁰ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.170.

¹⁷¹ 'An Interview with Mr. Lew Yuk Lin' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 2 No. 7, Sept. 1898, pp.102-104.

or by carefully guarding the interests of the people at large'.¹⁷² Lew here asserts the reasons why it was necessary on the part of the Chinese government to protect and safeguard the interests of those in the diaspora. He then explicates the 'advancement',¹⁷³ and social reforms that the Chinese can expect of China under the rule of Emperor Kwang Su, before continuing to encourage them in their efforts to maintain loyalty to the Chinese government:

The Chinese here have always retained their nationality and peculiarities, and a strong adherence to the old customs of China. Under a protective and vigorous Government, the inducements to keep up their connection with the old country would be greater now. ...the Chinese dwelling in foreign ports will instinctively look to their own Government for protection in case of injustice and find therefrom a ready response ...¹⁷⁴

The 'Chinese' here clearly refers to the China-born migrants, and the 'protective and vigorous government' refers to the ruling authorities in China. It is evident from Lew's account that the China-borns did not simply succumb to the political aspirations of the colonial power, but they have also retained their 'nationality' and peculiar ethnic traits. It would appear that they worked within the framework of colonial rule only to advance their own commercial interests, and by extension, the commercial interests of the British. In that sense, the relationship between the China-born Chinese and the colonial authorities could be characterised as interdependent and symbiotic. The British imperial power stimulated commerce in the settlement of Singapore, and this created opportunities for profit for members of the migrant community as well as simultaneously serving the colonial state's own mercantile interests. The China-born

¹⁷² *ibid.*, p.103.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*

Chinese wanted the opportunities of capitalism and the colonial government provided them.

Apart from the China-born Chinese, the Straits-borns were also employed by the colonial government to advance British commercial interests, but in rather different ways. The colonial power, in other words, sought not only to situate the two Chinese groups in relation to one another, but also to differentiate the diaspora internally between them. In addition, it needed to establish the trustworthiness of collaborating Chinese. In this respect, the Straits-born Chinese held an advantage over the rest of the diasporic community since they were in closer contact with the British government and the European community at large. In an essay published in 1899 for instance, the writer reveals the 'consistent support' that the Straits Chinese have given to the colonial government, 'the law-abiding character of their community', and the important part that they have played in all matters pertaining to the colony.¹⁷⁵ The excerpt here illuminates the relationship between the Straits-born Chinese and the colonials, and the community's abiding loyalty to the latter. As Rudolph suggests, many Straits-born Chinese during the nineteenth century 'were pro-British' and claimed an alliance with the colonial people and the British government.¹⁷⁶ This was especially true since the Straits-borns were in closer contact with the Europeans by virtue of their association with the Portuguese and the Dutch during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁷⁷ They were accustomed to dealing with European laws, understood the ways of the

¹⁷⁵ Song Ong Siang, 'Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?', *op. cit.*, p.66.

¹⁷⁶ Jurgen Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p.225.

¹⁷⁷ The settlement of Malacca, from where many Straits-born Chinese originated, was ruled briefly by the Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641, followed by the British in 1795.

European administrators,¹⁷⁸ and were therefore able to adapt quickly to British rule upon their re-settlement in Singapore.

From the perspective of the British government, the Straits-born Chinese were useful as intermediaries between the colonial administrators and others in the diaspora.¹⁷⁹ G.T. Hare makes this clear in his address to the community in 1897:

People who like you stand, as it were, half-way between East and West can do much to promote better feelings between the European resident here and the other Chinese. You can interpret China to Europe, and Europe to China. The contempt for foreigners and their unintelligible and unreasonable ways that is so strong in China, finds veiled expression here. It lies in your power to do much to remove these prejudices, to explain what is misunderstood and to foster and promote better relations between two peoples that do not understand one another fully.¹⁸⁰

Hare suggests that the British government regards the Straits-born Chinese as a possible ally, and as a mediatory class between the colonials and the rest of the diaspora. As a result, the diasporic subjects were classified by their role in and contribution to the colonial authority's administrative, economic, and political agendas. In the case of the local Straits-born Chinese, the colonials that governed the early diaspora depended upon them to arbitrate between the British and the China-borns. The British did not intervene directly in the affairs of the latter, but worked instead through the Straits Chinese and the local leaders of the *huiguans*, or clan associations.

¹⁸¹ Hare perceives the Straits-borns as necessary to the effective administration of the colony. Thus, his address to them, in the passage above, is one of exhortation where he

¹⁷⁸ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.167.

¹⁷⁹ Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, p.202.

¹⁸⁰ G.T. Hare, *op. cit.*, p.6.

draws the community into a working relationship with the British authorities. He appeals to them to take on the role of mediator between the colonial government and the Chinese community, and urges them to address the inherent prejudices that the China-born Chinese display against foreigners, that is, the British. Hare capitalises on the Straits-born Chinese position as being 'half-way between East and West', and uses it as a rhetorical weapon with which to entreat them to 'promote better feelings' between the European resident and the rest of the community.¹⁸² At the same time, Hare's address to the community in 1897 also suggests that from the perspective of the British government, the Straits-born Chinese were perceived as superior to the rest of the early diaspora, not only by way of their social and intellectual status, but in their corporeal, physical constitution. In his 1897 essay for instance, Hare goes on to describe the Straits Chinese as a "sanitised" version of the average Chinese, claiming that 'the Straits-born Chinese is clean', 'are models of cleanliness and good order' compared with their China-born counterparts. Through the use of sanitary metaphors, Hare distinguishes the Straits-born Chinese from the China-borns, thereby reinforcing the social and material disparity between the two.

On the part of the Straits-born Chinese, their aim, essentially, was to maintain a political dialogue with the British administrators, and it is evident that they were proud to be associated with the colonisers. For example, an anonymous writer in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* asserts that members of this community perceived themselves 'in

¹⁸¹ Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, p.204.

¹⁸² Abdul JanMohammed, 'The Specular Border Intellectual' in Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Edward Said. A Critical Reader*, London: Blackwell Publishers, 1992. JanMohammed's theory on the border intellectual is also appropriate here. As he suggests, for the colonialist, the new culture (of the colonised people) 'becomes an object of his military, administrative, and economic skills ...', (p.102) Following JanMohammed's argument, the diaspora during the nineteenth century became an object of the coloniser's gaze, and was subject to the hegemony of the British government.

every respect efficient and fit citizens of the British Empire'.¹⁸³ It is clear that the Straits-born Chinese, as 'citizens of the British Empire', lay claim to a political affinity with the British crown and were largely accepted by the colonial government. It is also evident that during the nineteenth century, the Straits-borns ranked well above the rest of the diaspora in terms of social status, and perceived themselves as socially superior. In an essay written in June 1897, for instance, the Straits-born Chinese writer Lim Boon Keng affirms that the community 'stand[s] well socially as compared with the different peoples in the colony',¹⁸⁴ and were a 'social success' due to their intellectual abilities and cultural inclinations. This can be seen in the way '[t]hey discuss[ed] politics and read the newspapers', as well as through their membership in 'many clubs and associations'.¹⁸⁵ Lim's assertions here are further reinforced by the colonial official G.T. Hare who commends the community in their 'successes in commerce, in business, in nearly every walk of life',¹⁸⁶ and this clearly reflects the status and perceptions of the Straits-born Chinese during the nineteenth century, which was one of social and intellectual betterment compared to the rest of the diaspora. The Straits Chinese, as Yong suggests, saw themselves as the elite of the Chinese community, and both Hare's and Lim's remarks above are certainly evidence of it.

The distance between the two diasporic groups is also reinforced in various narrative accounts published during the nineteenth century. The Straits-born Chinese despised the China-borns for being impervious to Western influences, and this point is sharply made in the pages of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in 1907. Speaking of the

¹⁸³ By One of Them, 'The Reform Movement Among the Straits Chinese' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol 2 No. 8, Dec. 1898, p.173.

¹⁸⁴ Lim Boon Keng, 'Our Enemies' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, *op. cit.*, p.56.

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ G.T. Hare, *op. cit.*, p.4.

Chinese educational system, the writer, who is a Straits-born Chinese, says, 'there must be a radical and a thorough change in the antiquated educational system' and 'does not hesitate to add that it is the 'present state of the religious beliefs' of the China-borns that 'hinders China in her onward progress'.¹⁸⁷ The writer then concludes by emphasising that the Chinese system of government 'ought to be changed and remodelled on Western lines.'¹⁸⁸ Likewise, Pan also argues that the Straits-borns, 'preferred not to be thought of as having Chinese tastes at all, doing his best to affect the predilections of the *orang putih*, "white man".¹⁸⁹

The local Straits Chinese, despite being the minority group, were also perceived or constructed as the superior class by the British government. Addressing the community, G.T. Hare says that '[t]he China-born Chinese ... may be in the majority - but I can tell you they really in their heart of hearts envy you all the advantages you enjoy by being Straits-born Chinese citizens.'¹⁹⁰ Hare makes a serious point. He highlights the social division within the diaspora, while acknowledging that the status of the Straits-born Chinese is socially and economically superior by asserting that they are 'British citizens enjoying by right of birth all the privileges and advantages' of this birthright.¹⁹¹ By granting legal status to the Straits-born Chinese, the British created a socially privileged group of intermediaries between them and the rest of the diaspora. Moreover, the Straits-borns were perceived as a class apart by the colonial government because of their economic and social position. A British writer,

¹⁸⁷ Leong Kwong Hin, 'How to Make China Strong' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. xi No.4, Dec. 1907, p.156.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p.157.

¹⁸⁹ Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, p.170.

¹⁹⁰ G.T. Hare, *op. cit.*, p.4.

¹⁹¹ *ibid.*, p.3.

George E. Earl, who investigated the Chinese in Singapore in the early 1830s, advised the European community to do business with the Straits-borns on these grounds:

They are more enlightened and make better merchants. Many of this class who have been educated at the Malaccan College, speak English tolerably well, and, from their constant communication with the Europeans they have acquired in some measure their habits and modes of transacting business ... ¹⁹²

Earl suggests that the Straits-born Chinese were better educated, and were therefore the chief merchants who dominated those business sectors important for commerce. The Straits-borns had knowledge of the European community based on their communication with them, and this was supplemented by their command of the English language. These factors allowed the Straits Chinese to enjoy their privileged status that came with mixing and working with the British.¹⁹³ It is also clear from the above account that the primary concern of the British authorities is for the merchant class with whom they traded. In the early diaspora, the Straits-borns were predominantly traders and businessmen, and were set apart from the working-class population of the China-born migrants. Thus, by privileging the status of the Straits-born Chinese, the colonial government favoured the merchant class, apparently for reasons of economic self-interest.

Ethnic Stereotypes and Colonial Narratives.

¹⁹² George W. Earl, *The Eastern Seas, or Voyages and Discoveries in the Indian Archipelago*, London: W.H. Allen, 1937, p.363, cited in G. William Skinner, *op. cit.*, p.79.

¹⁹³ More on the subject of the Straits Chinese community and their interactions with the European community can be found in Chapter Two.

The social restructuring of the diaspora, and the privileging of the merchant class in the colony, were undertaken by the colonial government to make the colony more profitable. More than ever before, the colonial government needed to establish the importance of the colony as a trading settlement, and to encourage the Chinese community to contribute to the growth of the colony. The British authorities did not hesitate to propagate the image of the diasporic people as a single industrious race. This is reflected in the ethnic stereotypes which emerged in colonial narratives, especially of the “adaptable Chinese migrant”, the “hardworking Chinese labourer” and the “industrious Chinese trader”. Subjects of the diaspora are typecast as such to promote and market the settlement as a centre for commerce and trade. These stereotypes are perpetuated in an account by the English colonial officer, J.D. Vaughan, who worked in Penang and Singapore in the mid-1830s.

In his account, Vaughan does not distinguish between the diasporic groups. Rather, he defines the Chinese community as a whole in terms of their industrious, versatile, and ambitious nature, as reflected in the narrative below:

The Chinese are everything: they are actors, acrobats, artists, musicians, ... doctors, schoolmasters, lodging-house keepers, butchers, porksellers, cultivators of pepper and gambier, cake-sellers, ... fishmongers, fruitsellers, ferrymen, grass-sellers, hawkers, merchants and agents, oilsellers, opium shopkeepers, pawnbrokers, pig dealers, and poulterers [*sic*]. They are rice dealers, ship chandlers, shopkeepers, general dealers, spirit shop keepers, servants, timber dealers, tobacconists, vegetable sellers, planters, market gardeners, labourers, bakers, millers, barbers, blacksmiths, boatmen, bookbinders, boot and shoemakers, brickmakers, ... To which we may add painters, paper lantern makers, porters, pea grinders, painters, sago, sugar and gambier manufacturers, ... ¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ J.D. Vaughan, *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements*, Singapore: Mission Press, 1879, cited in Victor Purcell, *op. cit.*, p.93.

Vaughan goes on to list a total of 110 separate occupations from merchants and traders to servants and thieves. The narrative suggests that he supported the prevailing British impression of the diaspora as a people who were motivated only by monetary concerns. The two diasporic sub-groups are merged into one and then typecast according to their various occupations. The narrative presents the diaspora as an enterprising and a versatile people who were ready to follow opportunities wherever they led, and ready to take on any trade to earn a living. What emerges, consequently, is the image of the diasporic Chinese as a community who are collectively defined by their industry and trade. Vaughan's account epitomises the sort of colonial discourse produced by colonial officers and European scholars during the era, in which the early diaspora becomes inevitably conceived and defined as the colonised Other, and is portrayed as an object of colonial discourses; that is, the Other is spoken for by the colonial discourse.

Apart from Vaughan's account, there are also colonial narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, which specifically refer to the China-born Chinese. These writings are part of colonial discourses in which, according to Said, the colonised are solely configured within the cultural and political terms of the coloniser. In 'Ada Wing's Marriage', for instance, a short story written by Kelwin Baxter and published within *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, the China-born characters are almost always voiceless and denigrated,¹⁹⁵ as illustrated at the beginning of the story. The narrative opens with a scene from the elaborate funeral of a China-born Chinese, Wing Ah Chong, whom

¹⁹⁵ Kelwin Baxter, 'Ada Wing's Marriage' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 4 No. 16, Dec. 1900, pp.146-155.

the narrator refers to as 'Old Wing'. The funeral and the mourners become objects of curiosity, where the narrator describes the funeral as 'a sight to be seen only once by those who have any regard for comfort or propriety'.¹⁹⁶ The wake, as the narrator continues to depict, is a tedious and 'noisy procession', and 'is shocking to one's ideas of mourning to witness in front of the hearse a masquerade of ruffians with shows of sorts, attended by coolies, many sick and mostly clad in rags making hideous noises'.¹⁹⁷ The narrative voice appears to be comparing his or her 'ideas of mourning' to that of the funeral rituals performed in the West. That the narrator finds the funeral 'shocking' suggests that the China-born's way of mourning conflicts with the narrator's own perception of what a funeral would normally entail. The narrator looks critically from a distance at the funeral procession of the deceased Wing Ah Chong, denigrating the poorly clad coolies for 'making hideous noises'. The mourners in the story are also perceived as inmates: '[t]hrough chinks and crevices the curious could see the inmates, ...'.¹⁹⁸ The tone is patronising and condescending, lending itself to an imperialist construction of the native as primitive and regressive. The community itself seems to be reduced to the simple categories of the non-rational and the uncivilised, and there is a distinct sense of horror at the irrational and excessive conditions in which wakes in traditional Chinese society are carried out. Further on in the text, the narrator also provides a derogatory image of the market place in the settlement: '[t]he market was an odd-looking building with a dome. It was a foul-smelling, dark and filthy conglomeration of stalls.'¹⁹⁹ This negative image is reinforced, while the tone is again

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p.146.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ Tomes Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, London: Hakluyt Society, 1944, p.116.

disparaging as the market place is judged for its 'foul-smelling', 'dark', 'filthy', and dilapidated state.

Apart from Baxter's narrative, there is also evidence of non-fictional, historical accounts which can be perceived as expressions of European ethnocentrism, where the China-born Chinese are denigrated and depicted as an undifferentiated group of people. The Portuguese official Tome Pires, for instance, describes the community as such: '[a]ll Chinese eat pigs, cows, and all other animals. They drink a fair amount of all sorts of beverages. ... They get pretty drunk. They are weak people, of small account.'²⁰⁰ Pires's statement here homogenises the China-born subjects as a race that is weak and 'of small account'. His narrative draws on essentially prejudiced definitions of the Chinese migrants, portraying them as a greedy and gluttonous people, who eat all types of animals and drink 'all sorts of beverages'. As a result of these perceptions, the immigrants were, during the nineteenth century, increasingly associated with deterministic notions of race, where discourses of the diaspora evolved out of the association of the idea that the China-born Chinese are all uniform and alike, in culture as well as in origins.

In reality, the China-born Chinese were far from being a homogeneous people characterised by particular mannerisms or traits. Rather, they embodied a highly heterogeneous and complex identity. Victor Ramraj contends that diasporic communities, '[t]hough linked by shared homelands and shared history of uprooting,

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p.84.

[...] are not monolithic or homogenous entities; they are richly diverse communities.²⁰¹

In the case of the China-borns, they never comprised a uniform community and were extremely varied within, as demonstrated in an anonymous article published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in 1899. This essay on the social organisation of the China-born Chinese highlights their heterogeneity in segregated dialect groups. The writer explains how the territorial divisions of the China-born's natal country are represented:

The Hokkiens and Hokchews comprise immigrants from the Fukien province, the former representing those from the Chang Chow and Tsuenchow prefectures and the latter those from the Foochow and its vicinity. The Teochews are from the Chaochow prefecture of Kwangtung province, while the Khehs are from Huichow and Kaiyingchow of the same province and from Tingchow of Fokien. The Macaos represent the inhabitants of the Canton river delta and the Hylams those emigrating from the island of Hainan as well as from the Kaochow and Lienchow prefectures of the adjoining mainland. Speaking distinct dialects, it is only natural that when those different communities organise they should adopt the territorial distinctions of their former homes.²⁰²

The writer goes on to cite other examples of dialect divisions within the China-born community, and continues to describe the ways in which the different dialect groups observe their religious and cultural traditions. According to Pan, grouping by dialect 'was the first and the most spontaneous of the characteristics of the diasporic Chinese community', and this was reflected in the 'network of native-place or dialect associations which they established in all the places in which they settled.'²⁰³ Such a social organisation was structured primarily around five dialect groups in the

²⁰¹ Victor Ramraj, 'Diasporas and Mutculturalism' in Bruce King (ed.), *New National and Post-colonial Literatures*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p.216.

²⁰² By a Straits Chinese, 'Local Chinese Social Organisations' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 3 No.10, June 1899, p.43. It is important, therefore, to recognise that the term 'China-born Chinese' that is used throughout this thesis refers to a diasporic sub-group that is by no means homogeneous, but divisive within itself, and divided by linguistic and cultural differences.

²⁰³ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.20.

community; the Fukien (Hokkien), Cantonese, Hakkas (Kheh), Teochew, and the Hainanese (Hailam). The majority of the community were Hokkiens, followed by the Cantonese and the Hakkas.²⁰⁴ This dialect situation alone offers a clue to the complexity of the diaspora's identity.

At the same time, even within the different dialect groups, the China-born Chinese were linguistically and culturally fragmented. Pan argues that 'above all it [was] speech that distinguished one community of Chinese from another.'²⁰⁵ The Fukien and Cantonese languages, for instance, were different and mutually exclusive.²⁰⁶ In addition, there were also specific cultural disparities in relation to gender. There were, for example, discrepancies between the women from the various ethnic groups in that the Hakka and Hainanese women, Yen suggests, were generally 'more accustomed to manual as well as domestic work', while the Fukien, Teochew and Cantonese women 'were more inclined to confine themselves to household activities.'²⁰⁷ These social divisions account for the diverse identity of the China-born Chinese, and Chapter Two will show that the inherent complexity within the community is such that they were at once united by a communal yearning for their homeland, and divided by linguistic and dialect differences. These alterities challenge the colonial government's assertions of a homogeneous diaspora.

Above all, contrary to what has been implied in colonial and historical narratives, neither the China-borns nor the Straits Chinese were driven solely by

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.117.

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p.14.

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.7.

mercantile activities and trade. The following chapter will show that by the 1920s and 1930s, the diaspora had begun to alter to include an emerging class of intellectuals educated in Chinese and colonial schools.²⁰⁸ Purcell could not be further from the truth when he claims that '[t]here was no cultivated leisure or academic class.'²⁰⁹ Newspapers and journals in both the English and Chinese languages had in fact appeared in greater numbers. For instance, the publication of the first Chinese newspaper *Lat Pau* in 1872,²¹⁰ and *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in 1897,²¹¹ testifies to the fact that there was indeed a cultivated academic class. These early publications, or what could be perceived as early literatures of Singapore of the pre-war period,²¹² reflected a rise in literacy in both tongues.

The *Lat Pau* for instance, was the first Chinese newspaper to be published in the Straits Settlements. Written chiefly in the Chinese language, no English translation of the *Lat Pau* has been recorded. The paper was started and funded by a sole proprietor See Ewe Lay, an influential Chinese businessman of the nineteenth century, whose family had a long history of settlement in Malaya and was well-established in the colony. The paper proved to be an early, but abortive attempt at Chinese writing, and was in circulation for about two decades before its final publication in 1890. By the end of its distribution in 1890, as Chen notes, readership had not reached 350, and the

²⁰⁸ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.134.

²⁰⁹ Victor Purcell, *op. cit.*, p.256.

²¹⁰ Chen Mong Hock, *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore 1881-1912*, Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967. Wang also alludes to this in *China and the Overseas Chinese*, p.134.

²¹¹ Chapter 3 devotes a study solely to *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, and in particular, the counter-discourses that demonstrate the subversion of colonialism.

²¹² The second era of Chinese and English literature written in Singapore was the post-war period, from the 1940s onwards, where many of the works that emerged during the period were the consequence of the Japanese war and rising anti-colonial nationalism. Literature of this period will be examined in the final section of Chapter Two.

Lat Pau remained the only one in its field.²¹³ It was not until the early twentieth century, from 1925 to 1930, that there was another surge of literary publication in the Chinese language. This occurrence, as the scholar Yeo Song Nian suggests, was the direct result 'of the increase in the number of Chinese writers coming from China',²¹⁴ who fled their homeland to escape persecution arising from the split between the Communist Party and the revolutionaries, the *Kuomintang*. Yet, despite the limited distribution of *Lat Pau*, the fact that such a publication had existed suggests that there were, amongst the *China-born Chinese of the nineteenth century, a community of intellectuals who contributed to a literary culture*. Wang has suggested that this emerging literary culture prompted an increasing awareness of political affairs in China and in the local community. He continues, 'literacy in the colonial or indigenous languages also led to a growing interest in the politics of colonialism and Southeast Asian nationalism.'²¹⁵ This surge of political and literary awareness disproves the colonial view of the diasporic Chinese as predominantly merchants, traders, or labourers, driven only by mercantile purposes.

By the same token, *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, first published in 1897, was also evidence of literary activity amongst the Chinese of the nineteenth century diaspora. As an English language journal, the magazine was produced and maintained predominantly by the Straits-born Chinese, and reflected the general literary interests of the community. More importantly, the existence of the magazine and its production

²¹³ Chen Mong Hock, *op. cit.*, p.28.

²¹⁴ Yeo Song Nian, 'Chinese Language Literature in Malaya and Singapore' in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Chinese Adaptation and Diversity. Essays on Society and Literature*, *op. cit.*, p.170.

²¹⁵ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.134. Details of the emerging literary culture which Wang describes here will be elaborated in the next chapter, which goes on to explore and trace the emergence of a tradition of English language writing in Singapore, while Chapter Three focuses solely on the writings of the nineteenth century, as produced within *The Straits Chinese Magazine*.

of literary writings demonstrate the emergence of an educated class of diasporic intellectuals. An article in the foremost issue of the magazine, for instance, commends the achievements of distinguished individuals in the community, who were successful in securing the Queen's scholarship, an award that provided Straits-born Chinese individuals the opportunity of further education.²¹⁶ The award of such a scholarship to numerous Straits-born Chinese intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century, such as Song Ong Siang, Lim Boon Keng, and Goh Lai Hee, further demonstrates the achievements of the diaspora in their educational and intellectual pursuits, indicating at the same time a level of literacy amongst members of the community. Like its contemporary *Lat Pau*, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* thus provided an outlet for the literary activities of the diasporic Chinese, and paved the way for the growth of a literary culture. Above all else, the fact that the magazine was authored and published locally, and had been in print during the nineteenth century, is thus evidence that the diaspora of the period was capable of sustaining other interests outside of business and commerce, and was not inspired and driven by merely economic and mercantile concerns.

This chapter has examined the migration of Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese to the settlement of Singapore during the nineteenth century. It also interrogated the image of the two diasporic communities as constructed by imperial discourses. The historical and colonial narratives of the early diaspora emphasise the subjects' capacity for hard work, and their appetite for self-advancement. Such narratives claim that what marks the diasporic people is their persevering and

²¹⁶ 'Queen's Scholars, 1897' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.1 No.2 March 1897, p.69. See also 'Queen's Scholars, 1899' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.3 No.10 June 1899, p.71.

industrious nature, and they are depicted as a single diaspora instigated by economic pursuits. Contrary to their perceptions, the early Chinese constituted a community of heterogeneous identities that is best captured in the differences between the two diasporic groups. While the China-born Chinese arrived directly from China and are defined by their immigrant status, the Straits-borns are considered as indigenous to the settlement and are characterised by their identity that has been culturally hybridised by local adaptation.

Chapter 2

Theorising the Early Chinese Diaspora: “Home” and Identity.

This chapter aims to provide the conceptual groundwork for subsequent discussions about the early diaspora. It explores the identity of the Straits-born Chinese and the China-born Chinese as it evolved from the nineteenth century to the 1950s and beyond. The title of this chapter has a double thrust that aims to structure this thesis as a whole. First, it offers an exploration of the early Chinese, and contends that the diaspora is a complex group that cannot be defined within a single cultural space, or for that matter, a single temporality. This is because the Straits-borns and China-borns remain stubbornly contradictory in their sense of belonging and cultural identity. The former embody an ethnicity in ways that exceed a geopolitical identification with China, and their perception of a “homeland” is not confined to the boundaries of a single nation-state. On the other hand, the latter are predominantly *huaqiaos*, that is to say, those who came directly from China and who regarded themselves as Chinese nationals.¹ As newcomers to the diaspora, they had to cope with living in a different world, but remained loyal to China. In this context, the discussion that follows will explore the extent to which the meaning of “home” and identity inform the constitution of the two communities, where multiple belongings and identities that are formulated in the wake of the diaspora’s migratory experience are constantly in the process of being formed.

¹ See the section ‘The Politicisation of ‘Huaqiao and the Identity of the China-born Chinese’ for further details about the usage and definition of the term ‘*huaqiao*’. The terms ‘China-born Chinese’ and ‘*huaqiaos*’ will also be used interchangeably throughout this chapter and thesis.

This chapter also suggests that the experience and subject position of the diasporic Chinese brings to light the inadequacies of existing diaspora discourses. In this case, the second thrust of the chapter is not merely to present the model of the early diaspora, but to explore the Chinese people in relation to central debates that have governed Diaspora Studies. Various scholars of these studies, such as William Safran, Vijay Mishra, Robin Cohen, James Clifford, and Avtar Brah, have theorised and questioned how 'diasporas' in general have evolved. The issues that arise from these analyses include how diasporas are sustained and how diasporic subjects feel themselves to be a part of and apart from their homeland as the sphere of natal belonging. Thus, while the aim of this chapter is to recapitulate the theoretical implications of existing diaspora frameworks, it exceeds this by questioning the limitations generated by these discourses. It is possible that the knowledge acquired from such an enquiry may be relevant and useful in shedding new light on the ways in which diasporas as a whole are conceptualised.

Re-thinking Diaspora: The Early Chinese in Singapore.

The complex cultural formation of the early Chinese diaspora necessitates a re-think of the theories that frame the term 'diaspora'.² Diasporic groups differ widely in their historical experiences, ethnic origins, and cultural orientations. According to Robin Cohen in *Global Diasporas* (1997), the idea of a diaspora varies greatly,³ and as Avtar Brah also suggests, all diasporas are differentiated in terms of their 'own history'

² Unless otherwise stated, the phrase 'early Chinese diaspora' refers to the Chinese community in general and includes both the Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese.

³ Robin Cohen, *op. cit.*, p.ix.

and 'own particularities',⁴ and these disparities make it necessary to analyse what makes one diasporic formation similar to or different from another. Following Cohen and Brah, the Straits-borns and China-borns of the nineteenth century are distinct in their own cultural and ethnic identity, and it is only through the study of these people as a separate cultural formation that insights into the character, experience, and behaviour of the community can be offered.

Historically, the origins of the term 'diaspora' is very clear. It is derived from the Greek *dia* (over) and *speirein* (scatter), and refers to the dispersal of the Jewish community from their homeland. In this sense, the appellation was construed strictly in terms of the oppression, captivity, and exile of ethnic Jews. However, the work of conceptualising 'diaspora' is also a project which betrays the instabilities of the very term itself, and to define 'diaspora' is not an easy task. As diasporic communities of various ethnic groups continue to emerge, the concept of diaspora can no longer be perceived solely in terms of the Jewish people. As Cohen has observed, other ethnic peoples abroad have also maintained strong collective identities and have, as such, defined themselves as diasporas.⁵

To start with, the very notion of a "Chinese diaspora" presents conceptual problems. The first and most obvious difficulty is in defining the early Chinese within a diaspora framework. For example, Walker Conner asserts the necessity for a broader conceptualisation of 'diaspora' to account for diasporic groups of the non-Jewish type. In an essay entitled 'The Impact of Homelands Upon Diasporas', he argues that a

⁴ Avtar Brah, *op. cit.*, p.182.

⁵ Robin Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

relatively small percentage of the world's population in the contemporary world lives within an ethnic homeland. According to him, this is a result of the prevalence of large-scale migrations of people across cultural, geographical, and geopolitical boundaries. A more realistic working definition of 'diaspora' should therefore be extended to include 'that segment of people living outside their homeland.'⁶ Such a definition would then make it possible to include different categories of ethnic communities who are in diaspora, and who live away from their natal land.

Yet, despite the fact that Conner's conceptualisation of 'diaspora' allows for the inclusion of new diasporic identities apart from the Jewish type, his definition oversimplifies their characteristics. If we consider Conner's definition, it is questionable whether the early diaspora fits his schema given that the Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese are inherently different in their constitution and cultural formation. As this chapter will soon reveal, the two diasporic groups remain contradictory in their perceptions of "home" and identity. While the China-borns identify with China and the Chinese government, the Straits-borns tend to be ambivalent. In an essay written in 1899 for instance, the Straits-born Chinese disclaim an affinity with the Chinese government, and affirm their position in repudiating 'any political allegiance to the Emperor'.⁷ That they had turned away from this emphasis on affiliations with China, as Wang suggests, 'must be seen as a deliberate political decision to affirm that they were more at home where they were than in China.'⁸ The excerpt above thus shows that "Chineseness", or the notion of a Chinese identity, is partially subjective, and that the meaning of being Chinese does not entail a political

⁶ Walker Conner, 'The Impact of Homelands Upon Diasporas' in Gabriel Sheffer, (ed.), *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, London and Sydney: Croom and Helm, 1986, p.16.

affinity to China or to the Chinese government. Rather, the meaning of being Chinese for the community corresponds to a cultural and ethnic “value”. Thus, where the meaning of “home” and identity is subjective to a particular diasporic subject and community, the early Chinese cannot be conceived and defined as a single diaspora in the manner that Conner uses the term.

The early diaspora in Singapore testifies to the difficulty in adhering to a diaspora theory that is based on an all encompassing global definition. The problem of perceiving the Chinese as a kind of diaspora is also that, contrary to conventional expectations of the term, since the nineteenth century they have ceased to be minorities in the settlement. In this respect, William Safran’s definition of ‘diasporas’ as communities of ‘expatriate minority’,⁹ forces us to question the very criterion against which the Chinese in Singapore can, at a basic level, even be considered a diaspora. This is because they are a special diasporic case in that nowhere else outside of China do the Chinese form the majority of the entire population in the settlement.¹⁰ Gabriel

⁷ Song Ong Siang, *op. cit.*, p.62.

⁸ Wang Gungwu, ‘Community and Nation’, *op. cit.*, p.149.

⁹ William Safran, *op. cit.*, pp.83-84.

¹⁰ Apart from Singapore, the Chinese also form the majority of the population in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. However, unlike Singapore, the latter three have at one time or another, been part of China politically. In fact, to this day all three states remain under the leadership of the Chinese government. Taiwan for example, was part of China during the nineteenth century. Its population today, is predominantly Chinese, and comprises descendants of Chinese immigrants who came from China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For more on the diasporic Chinese in Taiwan see Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, pp.49, 338-339. Hong Kong has also always been a predominantly Chinese-Cantonese society. It was ceded to the British in 1842, but was returned to the Chinese government recently, in 1997. Macau, like Hong Kong, is a chiefly Chinese, Cantonese city-state, and was also reverted to Chinese rule in 1997. However, unlike Hong Kong, Macau used to be a Portuguese colony in the sixteenth century, and its creolised society has been shaped by both Chinese and Portuguese influences. Rey Chow has written an essay on Hong Kong’s predicament as a colony that was “on lease” from China to Britain during the mid-nineteenth century. Her article examines the dual position of the colony in relation to both Britain and China, and the ramifications of its ambiguous status on its people, and the cultural works that have emerged from the colony (Rey Chow, ‘Between Colonisers: Hong Kong’s Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s’ in *Diaspora*, Vol. 2 No.2, 1992, pp. 151-169). For more on the Chinese in Hong Kong and Macau see also Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, pp. 57-58, 67-70, 105-107.

Sheffer has also problematised the notion of a Chinese diaspora in Singapore by emphasising the minority status of diasporic groups. He argues that the dispersion of ethnic people has led to the appearance of what he terms as 'modern Diasporas' - 'ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries'.¹¹ The inappropriateness of such a description of diasporas as 'minority communities' is apparent the moment one looks at the proportion of Chinese people within the host society.

Demography has shown that the Chinese constituted the single largest community in the settlement of Singapore in the nineteenth century and thereafter.¹² As the population of Straits-borns and China-borns increased from 1819 onwards, the Chinese people became the single largest community in the settlement, and while communities of indigenous Malays and other ethnic groups continued to grow, they soon lost their position of numerical dominance to these people. This is revealed in a census taken in 1836 and published in *The Encyclopaedia of Chinese Overseas*.¹³ In

¹¹ Gabriel Sheffer (ed.), *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, London and Sydney: Croom and Helm, 1986, p.3. By way of illustration, Sheffer refers to noteworthy examples such as the Hispanics in the United States, the Pakistanis and Palestinians in the Gulf areas, the Turks in Western Europe and the Israelis in the United States and Canada.

¹² See Appendix 2. By 'early diaspora' here I am referring to both the Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese, and I rely on the estimates given in *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*. It should, however, be noted that there is considerable confusion in existing historical accounts over when exactly the Chinese community formed the majority in the settlement. Stamford Raffles' account suggests that this occurred much earlier in the century, as revealed in a letter he wrote to the Duchess of Somerset in 1819, 'My new colony thrives most rapidly. We have not been established four months, and it has received an accession of population exceeding 5,000 - principally Chinese, and their number is daily increasing' (*Memoir of the Life and Public Service of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, by his widow*, London: Murray, 1830, p.383). It is not clear from the phrase 'principally Chinese' whether Raffles was referring to the Straits-born Chinese or China-born Chinese. What is clear however is that the Chinese population formed the majority group in 1819. By comparison, the European historian C.M. Turnbull suggests that the Chinese constituted the largest single community only in 1827. It is likely that Raffles' enthusiasm for his colony tended to exaggerate his estimate of the total number of Chinese. It is also possible that Raffles had exaggerated the figures in order to impress the colonial government. Although it is not clearly stated, the estimates given by Turnbull and *The Encyclopaedia* are likely to be nearer the truth.

¹³ See Appendix 2.

that year, the Chinese community formed the largest ethnic group in Singapore, making up 45.9 percent of the total population. The Malays came second with 41.7 percent, followed by the Indians with 9.9 percent, and other ethnic groups with 2.6 percent.

In 1849, the diaspora comprised approximately 53 percent of the total population. Between 1824 and 1871, the percentage of ethnic Chinese immigrants in the settlement increased from 31 to 58 percent, so that by 1871, the number of these migrants stood at 54,600, clearly surpassing the indigenous Malays, who numbered only 26,100 in the same period. Thereafter, the diasporic population continued to increase steadily in Singapore. When the country gained its independence, in 1965, the Chinese were, by far, the majority group in the new nation-state. Today, the Chinese community in Singapore is a special case in that nowhere else outside the People's Republic of China and Taiwan do they form the majority of the population.

The fact that the diasporic Chinese constitute the majority ethnic group in Singapore from the nineteenth century up to today, proves contrary to Sheffer's and Safran's assumption that diasporas are minorities. Cohen has written about the majority status of the Chinese in Singapore as a deviant characteristic. He writes: '[f]or the first and only occasion, a section of the Chinese diaspora constituted itself not as an ethnic minority, but as a majority in its own state.'¹⁴ Wang Gungwu has also maintained that the Chinese community in Singapore is exceptional in that it

¹⁴ Robin Cohen, *op. cit.*, p.90.

constitutes 75 percent of the entire population.¹⁵ Wang's and Cohen's remarks suggest that the diasporic community deviates from the conventional definition of the term, and is indifferent to the 'minority status' that usually pertains to most diasporas. This makes it difficult to deal with this community's condition within a general diasporic framework.

Moreover, Avtar Brah also expresses concern with the use of the concept of 'minority' in relation to diasporas, and voices scepticism in discussing diasporic groups along a 'majority/minority' axis.¹⁶ The problem, Brah suggests, lies with the different meanings of the appellation 'minority'. On the one hand, the term is used to describe, in numerical terms, the population of a diasporic group. On the other, it can also be used to signal the unequal relations of power that operate between dominant and subordinate classes, as in the phrase "the subjugated minorities". Given the different connotations of the term, it is thus difficult to ascertain, as Brah argues, '[w]hat category of person' is 'minoritised' in a specific discourse.'¹⁷ The meanings of the word 'minority' and its usage therefore remain problematic. To paraphrase Brah, this

¹⁵ Wang Gungwu, 'Among Non-Chinese' in Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *The Living Tree*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p.143.

¹⁶ Avtar Brah cites the British context as an example and argues that in Britain, there has been a tendency to discuss diaspora primarily along 'majority/minority' axis. This dichotomy surfaced in post-war Britain and was used as a post-colonial code to substitute the phrase 'coloured people'. Brah then goes on to outline the different meanings of the term 'minority' as it is derived and used in classical political theory. Referring to JanMohammed and Lloyd, Brah demonstrates how they have attempted to reformulate the term 'minority' as it has been conceived from different theoretical perspectives and in different discourses. According to her, JanMohammed's and Lloyd's research are important in endorsing a conception of 'minorities' that takes into account socio-economic and cultural relations of power, as they write: '[b]y 'minority discourse' we mean 'a theoretical articulation of the political and cultural structures that connect different minority cultures in their subjugation and opposition to the dominant culture' (JanMohammed and Lloyd, p.ix). Following JanMohammed and Lloyd, Brah expresses concern with respect to the more literal readings that the word 'minority' tends to engender, and the need, therefore, to re-valorise the term in relation to the issues of hegemony which the former two have suggested. See Avtar Brah, *op. cit.*, pp.186-195, and A. JanMohammed and D. Lloyd, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.189.

is because the numerical referent of the term 'encourages a literal reading, thus reducing the problem of power relations to one of numbers.'¹⁸ In other words, where the definition of diaspora is inevitably embroiled in political and cultural relations of power, the conceptualisation of diasporic groups in terms of a dichotomous 'majority/minority' opposition serves only to conceal the hegemonic relations inscribed in their formation.

Thus, the problem with Safran's and Sheffer's concept, as discussed earlier in this section, is that it embodies the notion of diasporic subjects as 'ethnic minorities' and 'minority communities', and recapitulates some of the problems Brah has identified. Moreover, there is no clear attempt in their definitions to qualify the concept of 'minority' as it occurs in the specific discourse. Even if Safran and Sheffer did endorse a concept of 'minority' that took into account the numerical status of a diasporic community and the hegemony that is inscribed within it, their definitions would nonetheless present conceptual difficulties because not all diasporas adhere to a minority/majority binary. The early Chinese, for instance, problematise the 'minority' status of diasporic groups in that they occupy a 'minority' and 'majority' position simultaneously. As demonstrated previously, while the Chinese are constituted as a majority (in numerical terms), they are, at the same time, constructed as a 'minority' (in political terms in their status as colonised subjects). As such, any definition of diaspora would have to engage with the relations of power that are invested within it, and to delineate diasporas in general as 'ethnic minority groups', as Safran and Sheffer have done, would thus serve to limit the conceptual possibilities of defining the term. The use of binaries or dichotomies, as Brah argues, 'can all too readily be assumed to

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.187.

represent ahistorical, universal constructs.’¹⁹ Consequently, I propose that the term ‘diaspora’ that is today often used to describe any population which has dispersed from its natal land, should not only take into account the relations of power that are inscribed within it, but the issue of identity and subjectivity that demarcates the group. It is perhaps only then that the diversity of diasporas, and the set of historical and socio-political specificities that shape each diasporic formation, can begin to be considered.

Yet, while Brah’s reformulation of ‘minority discourse’ is of crucial importance in highlighting its conceptual problems, it does not necessarily imply that the concept of a diaspora cannot be applied to the Chinese people. It can be contended that the early Chinese continue to display other diasporic traits, and share characteristics of the so-called “ideal” type of diaspora proposed by Safran. According to him, members of diasporic groups ‘believe that they are not - and perhaps cannot be - fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it’.²⁰ Safran’s definition implies that diasporic subjects define themselves as a group that lives in displacement, in which case, the China-born Chinese in the early diaspora fulfil his criterion.²¹ As the next section will show, those in this group live in displacement and alienation within the host settlement, despite their majority status. They regard China as their homeland and as the place to which they would eventually return. As such,

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.184.

²⁰ William Safran, ‘Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return’ in *Diaspora*, Spring, 1991, p.84.

²¹ The China-born Chinese formed the majority of the early diaspora, making up 90.5 percent of the Chinese community. The Straits-born Chinese made up the rest of the 9.5 percent (See Appendix 1). It is argued here that although the China-born Chinese constitute the majority of the diaspora, they paradoxically perceive themselves in relation to the “hosts” of the settlement.

they resist assimilation into the indigenous community and remain at the margins of the host settlement.

In a similar way, if the concept of a diaspora can be applied when members of the community, or their ancestors, have themselves been dispersed from an original “centre” to two or more foreign regions, as mentioned by Safran, then the Straits-born Chinese can also be characterised as a diasporic group.²² The ancestors of this community, as immigrants who were displaced from their homeland in China to the settlement, clearly constitute a diasporic group. Thus, given the complex situation of the Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese, it is necessary to critically examine how the meaning of the term ‘diaspora’ is applied to the situation in Singapore. Perhaps the issue is not really how the Chinese people can or cannot be understood in the context of existing theoretical frameworks, but how, despite deviating in some ways from conventional notions of the term, it offers an alternative illustration of how diasporic groups can be conceived, or the ways in which the frameworks can be modified.

Notions of Belonging for the Diaspora: The “Home” In and Outside China.

‘Diaspora’, as a Greek word that refers to the act of dispersal, evokes the image of a people being scattered from a centre, a place of origin, a “home”. Almost all diaspora theories have acknowledged the pivotal force of the homeland. Sheffer argues that diasporic communities share an attachment to their natal country, albeit in

²² William Safran, *op. cit.*, p.84.

varying degrees. He suggests that diasporic subjects maintain 'strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin - their homelands.'²³ Similarly, Steven Vertovec claims that diasporas maintain 'a variety of explicit and implicit ties with their homelands',²⁴ while Conner's definition of diaspora as that segment of people living outside their homeland implies a positioning of diasporic groups in relation to the homeland.²⁵ Central to Sheffer's, Vertovec's and Conner's assumptions is therefore the rhetoric of the "homeland". Their theories suggest that the diasporisation of ethnic groups involves not merely the mobilisation of a people away from their place of origin, but, significantly, the relationship between the diaspora and its natal territory.

Using Sheffer's, Vertovec's, and Conner's theories as a point of departure, I argue that the Straits-born Chinese's and China-born Chinese's attachment to an ancestral land is complex and cannot be conceptualised within a general framework, primarily because the meaning of "home" is different for each diasporic group. For the China-borns, the homeland in China has always had a strong hold on their loyalty and emotions. The presence of the Chinese state, as Tu Wei-ming asserts, in its 'awe-inspiring physical size, its long history, and the numerical weight of its population'²⁶ continues to feature prominently in their imagination. The China-borns' concept of belonging in relation to the homeland in China is such that it has also shifted and changed over time. This is evident for example, toward the end of the 1950s when the

²³ Gabriel Sheffer (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.3.

²⁴ Steven Vertovec, 'Three Meanings of "Diaspora," Exemplified among South Asian Religions' in *Diaspora* 6:3, Winter 1997, p.279.

²⁵ Walker Conner, *op. cit.*, p.16. Vijay Mishra goes one step further by arguing that the homeland is an imaginary one; it is a construct that is re-created imaginatively by its subjects. The significance of Mishra's theory will be discussed in the next section on the meaning of 'xiang' and the China-born Chinese.

²⁶ Tu Wei-ming, 'Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center' in Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *The Living Tree*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p.18.

picture of them as sojourners and immigrants in the early diaspora is replaced by another picture of them as settlers. As the following discussion demonstrates, the relationship of the first generation China-born immigrants to their natal state is different from that of subsequent generations, where the old assumption that the China-born Chinese would continue to identify with the natal country in terms of political and national loyalty, can no longer be taken for granted. If, as Tu Wei-ming points out, that identity is something that is culturally constructed',²⁷ then just as there is no single or uniform meaning of "home", there is also no single or homogeneous meaning of a Chinese identity. The identities of the China-borns and Straits-borns are far from homogeneous, but constructed across different sub-cultures and different subject positions. While members of both groups may be identified as Chinese, their diasporic experiences, and their cultural and ethnic constitutions are radically different.

The Meaning of "Xiang" and the China-born Chinese.

The notion of a homeland for the China-born Chinese carries a symbolic significance, for deeply embedded in their relationship with the homeland, 'is one of the most evocative words in the Chinese language, far more emotive than its equivalent in English:'²⁸ the word 'xiang'. The Chinese word 'xiang' is conceived differently from its English translation 'home', and according to the *Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary*, it is a term which refers to one's village, town, homeland, or simply a place of emotional attachment. This definition resonates secondary meanings of ethnic and

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.ix.

²⁸ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.21. Pan offers a general discussion of the term 'xiang', suggesting that the word can mean a village, a countryside, one's home town or native place. Following Pan's analysis, this section builds on the different meanings and definitions of 'xiang', looking at the ways in which

familial ties, and can also be used synonymously in a more complex and compounded form by attaching the prefix '*jia*'. In this case, the terms '*jia xiang*' and '*xiang*' can be used interchangeably to define a notion of home that pertains to the Chinese people, a notion that is distinct within the Chinese culture and can be reflected in the several meanings of '*jia*' and '*xiang*' described below.

The first word '*jia*' is a Chinese term for 'family', and the nearest translation for the term '*xiang*' is 'home'. However, placed together, the English word 'home' is a close but inadequate translation of the word '*jia xiang*'. This is because the use of the expression '*jia xiang*', or its contracted form '*xiang*', refers not only to one's native place or home, but also to one's familial and ethnic ties. Aside from its basic meaning, the concept of '*xiang*' or '*jia xiang*' also encapsulates several other concepts. On one level, it stands for a person's birthplace, ancestral village, natal country, or the source from which one derives one's personal identity. On another level, it is inextricably tied to and equated with a person's primordial ties, defined in ethnic, familial, linguistic, and cultural-religious terms. On yet another level, it can be used to designate China as the geopolitical centre. The term '*xiang*' is therefore at once spatial, emotive, and familial. These various meanings underlie the bond between the Chinese people and China, and constitute the meaning of the words '*xiang*' and '*jia xiang*' for members of the diaspora.

It could also be suggested that the word '*jia*' carries several meanings of 'home' as it assumes a series of variant forms. For instance, various combinations of

the word operates on different levels, and the various ways in which the term can be conceptualised by subjects of the diaspora.

terms within the Chinese script can be built up from the root word '*jia*' - all of which allude in one sense or another to the meaning of 'home'. This is represented through the expressions '*jia ting*', '*jia yuan*' and '*jia zu*'.²⁹ The second terms in all three expressions vary phonetically and semantically. Yet, when placed together with the word '*jia*', their connotations are similar in that they all relate to a notion of home. The phrase '*jia ting*', for instance, carries the meaning of family or home, depending on the syntax. Similarly, the expression '*jia yuan*' refers to one's native place or one's land of birth, while '*jia zu*' refers to one's clan or family. In all these appellations, by understanding the basic meaning of '*jia*', it is possible to discern the significance of the phrase as the notions of '*jia ting*', '*jia yuan*', and '*jia zu*' are contained within the meaning of '*jia xiang*'. The latter term draws on essentially shared definitions of *jia ting*, *jia yuan*, and *jia zu*. Thus, the English expression 'home' as the place where one lives or as the place where one was born or grew up, is a close but nonetheless inadequate translation of '*xiang*'. The meaning of '*xiang*' or '*jia xiang*' is potentially provocative as it is a concept that is attached specifically to the Chinese homeland, and is therefore pregnant with cultural and familial connotations. As a discursive concept, '*xiang*' or '*jia xiang*' has its own logic in the Chinese language that may be said to constitute the distinct relationship between the diaspora and its homeland. This notion of home is vital as it is defined in both "racial" and cultural terms, and may at times be conceived as ethnocentric, chauvinistic or even racist.

²⁹ The *Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary*, and the Chinese Dictionary: *Xin Hanyu Zidian*, offer definitions for each term.

A common place of origin, as Myron L. Cohen argues, is ‘one of the major ascribed statuses in Chinese society.’³⁰ For the China-born Chinese, the natal territory is embodied not only in a cultural-linguistic sense, as represented by the term ‘*jia xiang*’, but also in a “biological” and symbolic sense through their belief in a “biological lineage” to a common progenitor and ancestry - *Huang Ti*. The Yellow Emperor or *Huang Ti* is one of the cultural heroes of Chinese mythology. The China-borns believe, at least to some extent, that all Chinese ultimately descended from him. As the legend goes, *Huang Ti* had twenty-five sons, fourteen of whom were each given a different surname by the Emperor, and all Chinese names are thought to have derived in some way from these fourteen. Thus, *Huang Ti* is worshipped as a patriarch, and as the root of all ancestry.³¹ In the early diaspora, any family rich enough would maintain an ancestral temple in the host country, with spirit tablets arranged in order of generational seniority. Twice a year, kinsmen would gather to conduct a grand ceremony to worship *Huang Ti*.³²

While such a theory of “biological” lineage may seem patently absurd, it does reflect the symbolic and intense attachment of the China-born Chinese to their *jia xiang*.³³ Hence, the meaning of being Chinese for these diasporic subjects, is “biologically” created from a mythic discourse. The ethnic identification of having originated from the same progenitor evokes strong sentiments of historical consciousness and cultural continuity; sentiments which work to strengthen the primacy of *jia xiang* for the community. As Jon Stratton suggests, a key element in the

³⁰ Myron L. Cohen, ‘Being Chinese: The Peripheralisation of Traditional Identity’ in Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.96.

³¹ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.11.

³² *ibid.*, p.10.

³³ *ibid.*, p.12.

ideological formulation of 'diaspora' is the notion of having left the place, 'not just of one's own origin - one's birthplace - but of the origin of one's people.'³⁴ For this reason, the link to a common origin and progenitor is important for the displaced group of China-borns as a means by which they can preserve their identity. For some, claims to ethnic oneness and a "biological" lineage to *Huang Ti* serve as a return to the *jia xiang*, and as a consoling thought during their stay in the diaspora. This aspect of the diasporic experience can be perceived in relation to the concept of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community'. For Anderson, members of the community create an image of their communion or comradeship in their minds, and consider themselves to form a nation, even though most of them will never know, meet, or hear about each other. The idea of a "nation", in this sense of the term, is 'imagined' and predicated in a belief held by a group of individuals that they share a common origin, status, and aspiration.³⁵

Similar to Anderson's formulation of the nation as an 'imagined community', one of the connotations of 'diaspora' relates to its emphasis on the importance of its subjects' unity. The mythic discourse of *Huang Ti* and *jia xiang* evoke an interconnectedness among the China-born Chinese, who perceive themselves as sharing a common homeland, ancestry, culture, and as belonging to an 'imagined community'. As a local writer describes the community in 1899, the China-born Chinese 'are fully alive to the force of the adage that 'union is strength', and their

³⁴ Jon Stratton, '(Dis)placing the Jews: Historicising the Idea of Diaspora' in *Diaspora* 6:3, 1997, pp.314-315.

³⁵ It is this concept of the 'nation' as an "imagined community" that helps cement a sense of belonging among many disparate peoples. According to Anderson, all communities are imagined, and all communities can be distinguished, 'not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined' (p.6). Anderson proceeds to delineate the processes by which the nation comes to be

principal objectives in the colony are ‘the preservation and maintenance of their interests, national, religious, and social’.³⁶ Indeed, for those China-borns who stayed loyal to their “roots”, their relationship with *Huang Ti* and *jia xiang* provides a space from which they can re-create and maintain their sense of identity and belonging. Through a shared imagination, *jia xiang* as a natal (or imagined natal) territory, can be sustained and re-created in the minds of the the China-born people.³⁷

In addition, this notion of an imagined homeland and ancestor can also be examined in relation to the theoretical analysis of Conner and Mishra. According to Conner, the profound relationship between the homeland and the diasporic subject is such that even though the psychological associations between the two are ‘often predicated upon questionable history’,³⁸ the diaspora may nonetheless lay exclusive claim to its homeland. His phrase ‘questionable history’ suggests that the relationship between the diaspora and its homeland need not necessarily be factual or realistic, but it can also be imaginary. For Mishra, the diaspora’s place of origin is imaginary because it is constructed from a distance and “lives” in the minds of the diasporic subject.³⁹ If we consider Mishra’s argument, then the diasporic subject is not only

imagined and how, once imagined, it is modelled, adapted and transformed. For more on the subject see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (rev. ed.), London: Verso, 1991.

³⁶ By a Straits Chinese, ‘Local Chinese Social Organisations’ *op. cit.*, p.44.

³⁷ Diaspora scholars have attempted to conceptualise the strength of the diaspora’s relationship with its homeland. Despite the fact that the link between diasporas and their homelands is not quantifiable, Sheffer acknowledges that there exists ‘strong sentimental and material links’. According to Conner, the diaspora’s profound attachment to the homeland is such that its ethnic place of origin is not just territorial, but also emotional and psychological. This is evident in the frequent use of emotionally-charged terms such as ‘the motherland, the fatherland, the native land, the ancestral land, land where my fathers died and, not least, the homeland, the territory so identified becomes imbued with an emotional, almost reverential dimension’ (Walker Conner, *op. cit.*, p.16). In a similar way, pervaded with such profound emotional and psychological associations, it is therefore not difficult to conceive how the ‘*jia xiang*’ in China as a political, ethnic, and material site, plays an indispensable and central role in the constitution of the China-born Chinese identity.

³⁸ Walker Conner, *op. cit.*, p.18.

³⁹ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.* p.423.

involved in the maintenance or restoration of the natal land, but also in its very creation.

In the case of the Chinese diaspora, the notion of an imaginary homeland, as theorised by Conner and Mishra, can be illustrated, for example, through the writings of Ovidia Yu and Goh Sin Tub. In Yu's short story 'A Dream of China', the diasporic subject identifies with his *jia xiang*, despite having lived in Singapore for half a century, '[a]fter fifty years in Singapore, 'home' for him was still Szechuan.'⁴⁰ The father in Yu's story constructs an image of the *jia xiang* with 'beautiful lands', 'white water rapids', 'stone temples, 'and trekked forests'.⁴¹ He clings onto this image of *jia xiang*, despite the fact that China is a 'troubled land' that has been bruised and savaged by the cultural revolution.⁴² The father describes the *jia xiang* in ways that are very different from the reality of China itself, and thereby supports Mishra's argument that diasporas very often construct narratives of homelands in 'purist terms', as a kind of jouissance against the reality of the homelands themselves.⁴³ It is 'purist' because the diasporic subject identifies with an image of the natal territory that represents what "he" would like it to be, rather than what it is in reality.⁴⁴ In Yu's narrative, the *jia xiang* is romanticised as the ideal condition. The father even assumes an imaginary "Chinese" identity where 'in Singapore [he] tried to live as he felt a true Chinese would',⁴⁵ and creates a *jia xiang* that no longer exists. In this sense, his image of the *jia xiang* has proved to be "frozen" and timeless whereby he still thinks of it in very

⁴⁰ Ovidia Yu, 'A Dream of China' in *Prizewinning Asian Fiction*, Singapore: Times Books International, 1991, p.162.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*, p.163.

⁴³ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.*, p.424.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Ovidia Yu, *op. cit.*, p.164.

much the same terms as he did fifty years ago. As the narrator says, it is a *jia xiang* which 'no longer exists except in him and in other men who try to live true to the dream of China in their hearts.'⁴⁶

Like Yu's father, the two brothers from China in Goh's writing *The Sin-kheh* also cling to an 'imaginary homeland'. As the narrator says, '[t]hey both fell silent, both transported back to bask once more in that golden warmth, that indescribable splendour of their ancestral home on Golden Hill in faraway Hosan, Amoy.'⁴⁷ Here again, the diasporic imagination is at work, and "China" becomes a country the brothers have invented in their minds. The two brothers fantasise about their *jia xiang* as a perfect and ideal place, and it becomes encapsulated in the form of a plaque which the two brothers display above the doorway to the family living quarters, '[i]n glorious goldleaf, etched on jet-black lacquered wood, the Chinese characters read: Kim San - Golden Hill.'⁴⁸ The Chinese words are a reminder and symbol of their *jia xiang*. The natal (or imagined natal) territory is treated with a particular reverence by them and Yu's father, who can be seen to seek an ideal *jia xiang* where their dreamed values become true, and China is that dreamland. The return to the *jia xiang* for the two brothers and Yu's father is not necessarily a physical one, but is imaginary and psychological.⁴⁹ Such an argument evokes a powerful figure of a "returning" Chinese diasporic subject/emigrant, crossing psychological and emotional boundaries of (un)belonging in order that he or she may be reunited with his or her homeland in China. Yu's and Goh's writings clearly illustrate that the *jia xiang* (or imaginary *jia xiang*) is a focal point of identification for the China-born Chinese, whose attachment

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p.173.

⁴⁷ Goh Sin Tub, *op. cit.*, p.13.

to their *jia xiang* is also mediated through the Chinese poem made famous by the eighteenth century Chinese poet Li Bai:

The moon light is pouring down on my bedside
 like white frost spreading on the ground
 I look up the bright round moon in the sky
 and lower my head thinking of my dear hometown.⁵⁰

Here, the emphasis is again on the homeland or the *jia xiang* that has been left behind, and the diasporic subject thinking of his or her 'dear hometown' suggests a symbolic return to it. Where the reunion between the subject and the *jia xiang* is not possible physically, at least it is constructed metaphorically in the poem through the diaspora's imagination. The illusory homeland is mediated through the imagery of the 'white frost spreading on the ground' and the 'bright round moon in the sky'. As Avtar Brah asks, '[w]here is home?'. 'Home', on the one hand, is the mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. On the other, it is also 'the lived experience of ... the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings ...'⁵¹ The poem's preoccupation with "home" and origins suggests that the diasporic subject's attachment to the *jia xiang* has not in any way weakened as a result of migration. Rather, a strong tie to the past still exists, and the subject's connection to the *jia xiang* in China (or imagined China) is instrumental for its survival. What emerges from the poem, then, is the recurring image of the melancholic Chinese immigrant thinking of his *jia xiang* in China, where the nostalgic return to the 'hometown' is itself ideological in that it remains imaginary; a construction created in the narrative. The image of the diasporic subject thinking of its

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ See Vijay Mishra's 'imaginary homeland' and the diasporic subject.

⁵⁰ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.21.

⁵¹ Avtar Brah, *op. cit.*, p.192.

'hometown' reinforces the *jia xiang* as an imaginative construct, created and sustained in its mind.

The attachment of the China-born Chinese to their *jia xiang* as demonstrated through Li Po's poem, is thus an inextricable and essential feature of their identity. In that sense, the China-born Chinese can be said to display the diasporic traits of the so-called "ideal" type of diaspora mentioned by Safran, whose definition suggests that the homeland is an important point of identification. One of the characteristics that he believes members of a diaspora share is that 'they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home', and 'they relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another.'⁵² Safran's theory places emphasis on the sovereignty of the diaspora's ethnicity and place of origin. He defines the diasporic subject's consciousness and solidarity in terms of its continuing relationship with its homeland, and by the maintenance of a memory, vision or myth about it. In the case of the China-borns, their sense of ownership and belonging is embodied in the concept of *jia xiang*. Safran's definition offers the possibility of fraternity whereby these migrants are united through a shared symbolic reference to a mutual and imagined *jia xiang*, and to their common, if not mythical, ancestry. As such, the immigrant subject can ensure that its ethnic and cultural affiliations come together in one discourse via a racialised notion of identity. Identity, as Paul Gilroy writes, 'is a fundamental part of how groups comprehend their kinship - which may be an imaginary connection although

⁵² William Safran, *op. cit.*, Safran uses expressions such as 'collective memory', 'original homeland', 'ethnocommunal consciousness', and 'solidarity' to define the diaspora's relationship with the homeland. These terms are imbued with a sentimental pathos, and they betray a sense of chauvinism of the diaspora's belonging and identity toward their natal country.

nonetheless powerful for that.⁵³ Using the African diaspora as an example, Gilroy argues that the unity and identity of the black Atlantic is constituted through historical ties of kinship and a shared heritage. If we take on Gilroy's definition of identity, the early diaspora becomes, then, a cultural site where notions of "authentic" loyalty to the *jia xiang*, the Chinese ancestral lineage, and compatriots of the same ethnic origins, seep through these articulations of affiliation and ethnic belonging(s). The identity of the diasporic subject is transformed into a definition of culture as a site of belonging, and a right of ownership to the *jia xiang*.

At the same time, the meaning of being Chinese for the China-born people is also a result of an identification with the *jia xiang* as an experienced reality in which they have lived and interacted with members of the same origins. Yvonne Quahe's *We Remember. Cameos of Pioneer Life* (1986) describes the trauma felt by many China-born Chinese in having to leave their *jia xiang*. Quahe records the sentiments of one such immigrant:

'The saddest event of my life was the time when I had to leave my parents, which is what we call *Seng Li* - to part with the living. I had to part with my parents in the village to go to a foreign country and earn a living. I realised that if I returned unsuccessful from my foreign trip, I would have let them down and would have incurred the contempt of my clansmen. So I made up my mind to only succeed and not to fail. I considered this to be the most important event in my life, the most difficult thing I had to do.'⁵⁴

⁵³ Paul Gilroy, 'Diaspora and the Detours of Identity' in Kathryn Woodward (ed.), *Identity and Difference*, London: Sage Publications, 1997, p.302. See also by the same author, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987; 'Cultural Studies and Ethnic Absolutism' in Lawrence Grossberg, Paula Treichler, and Gary Nelson (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge, 1991, pp.187-197.

⁵⁴ Yvonne Quahe, *We Remember. Cameos of Pioneer Life*, Singapore: Landmark Books Pte. Ltd, 1986, p.1.

The above excerpt records the view of Chew Choo Keng who, like many from China, had come to Singapore directly from China in the hope of earning a living. It is clear that Chew's attitude and perception of his *jia xiang* is inextricably tied to familial and cultural bonds, and to the notion of success. The term *seng li* is an expression that refers to the leaving of one's *jia xiang* and family. The first term *seng* means to part from one's land of birth. The second term *li* means to part from one's living relative and is also a term used as a measure of distance - a mile. Placed together, the expression *seng li* refers not only to the literal parting from one's *jia xiang* and family, but the emotional and psychological distance between the person and his or her loved ones.

The significance of the concept of *seng li* means that Chew's decision to leave his *jia xiang* is not an easy one. The pain of separation from kith and kin in China is clear from the account, and it shows the intensity of his attachment to the *jia xiang*. This trauma of having to leave the homeland suggests that '[t]he Chinese rootedness in his [sic] own native place, and his deep dislike of leaving his ancestral home, were aspects of the importance he attached to family.'⁵⁵ The heavy burden carried by Chew in leaving for a foreign country is one that is shared by many immigrants of his time. The account reveals the socio-familial pressures that they have had to face, even prior to leaving the *jia xiang*. It demonstrates that many China-born Chinese, like Chew, do not have full agency in that their decision to leave the homeland is (at least partly) socially determined, and they need to succeed in order to escape the 'contempt of [their] clansmen'. In these circumstances, the notion of *seng li* suggests that as migrants depart from their *jia xiang* to find work in the diaspora, their relationship

with the homeland in China remains a profound point of identification defining their diasporic experience and identity. It is a relationship firmly planted in the consciousness of many diasporic Chinese, as can be seen from Chew's conviction to 'only succeed and not to fail' in his endeavour.

For the China-born Chinese such as Chew, China features prominently as a historical and cultural nexus. Their deep-rooted sense of belonging is a reflection of their loyalty toward their *jia xiang* as a cultural, "biological" and imagined construct. At the same time, for the Chinese immigrant, this familial and ethnic identification with the *jia xiang* is also realised through clan associations, known as *huiguans*. During the nineteenth century, the *huiguans* were formed on the basis of the diasporic subjects' dialect group or surname. Thus, for instance, the Hokkiens of the colony would have their Yuat Hai Miow *huiguan*, the Khehs the Cha Yang *huiguan*, the Teochews the Khing Chow *huiguan*, and the Cantonese the Ling Yang *huiguan*.⁵⁶ Each of the dialect group would assemble in their own *huiguan*, where the task of maintaining and funding the association was undertaken by influential and rich members of the community. During the period of the early diaspora, these *huiguans* are fiercely important to the China-born for the reason that they summon into existence a form of 'imagined community', by providing a link between the members and their *jia xiang*. An essay published in 1899 for instance, suggests that the *huiguans* 'do not profess any political motives' but are involved in serving the religious and social interests of the immigrant community. The various activities of the associations would include, for instance, 'public theatrical shows', religious processions, and 'merry-making

⁵⁵ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.21.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.44.

festivities', and these, as the writer indicates, provide a form of respite for the Chinese immigrant 'from the overpressure of their daily avocations.'⁵⁷ The historian Yen Ching Hwang suggests that the term *huiguan* refers both to the physical building of the association, as well as to the body of people which it housed,⁵⁸ and through the clan associations, the body of the diasporic community is imprinted on the host nation in a very physical, that is, architectural way. As Jon Stratton also argues, one trait of diasporas is that they create 'new communal organisations in places of settlement',⁵⁹ and the existence of the associations can be conceived as a material embodiment of such a communal organisation. The *huiguan* is thus important as a place of social gathering for the China-born Chinese, where membership of the association meant that the isolated and alienated immigrant could find solace in compatriots who were of the same place of origin, and in a similar predicament. The communion between members of the same origin spawned patriotic sentiments, and as Pan points out, 'the dialect association was partly a mutual aid society, partly a club-house, and partly a place to go to re-immense oneself in one's Chineseness.'⁶⁰ More than anything else, the *huiguan* assuaged the members' nostalgia for their *jia xiang*, and satisfied their longing to be with people from the same province. As a local writer asserts in 1899, '[I]iving under an entirely new and foreign civilisation the Chinese immigrants instinctively appeal to their own countrymen for assistance and protection',⁶¹ and for the Chinese immigrants,

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.8. According to Yen, the *huiguans* provided the China-born Chinese with a formal place of respite from their foreign environment. The leader of these *huiguans* were usually rich merchants who were elected and could well afford to donate the money required to run the association. In return for serving the community, the leaders earned the respect from the other members and were known to influence the attitudes of the members. The Chinese term '*kongsi*' is sometimes also used interchangeably with '*huiguan*' to refer to any such clan that was established in the diaspora. See Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.112.

⁵⁹ Jon Stratton, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.112.

⁶¹ By a Straits Chinese, 'Local Chinese Social Organisations', *op. cit.*, p.45.

the clan association is, in Pan's words, 'a home away from home',⁶² where their emotional attachment to the *huiguan* is translated into their loyalty to the *jia xiang*.

The *huiguan*, the concept of *jia xiang*, and the significance of *Huang Ti* are thus aspects of the China-born Chinese's identification with their homeland. Conner argues that there exist 'strong sentimental and material links' between diasporic subjects and the homeland.⁶³ The China-born's attachment to his *jia xiang* as an ethnic place of origin is not just territorial, but imagined as well. In which case, it is not difficult to conceive how the homeland, as an emotional, cultural, and material site, plays an indispensable role in the constitution of the diasporic subject's identity. Pan sums it up well when she says that '[f]or all their regional separatism, the expatriate Chinese were completely united in their passionate attachment to their homeland.'⁶⁴

The Politicisation of “*Huaqiao*” and the Identity of the China-born Chinese.

The importance of the *jia xiang* meant that however attractive the reasons for migration, the decision to emigrate was not an easy one for the migrant subjects. The cultural and emotional attachment of the China-borns to their *jia xiang* is profound, particularly as they are also *huaqiao*s or Chinese sojourners.⁶⁵ The concept of *huaqiao* suggests a Chinese identity that is attached to China as the geopolitical centre, and entails a loyalty to one's *jia xiang* as a political, cultural and ethnic nexus. It is significant that the term *huaqiao* itself is intertwined with powerful political and

⁶² *ibid.*, p.113.

⁶³ Walker Conner, *op. cit.*, p.16.

⁶⁴ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.21.

⁶⁵ In this section, the term *huaqiao* will be used interchangeably with 'China-born Chinese'.

ideological implications. By the beginning of the twentieth century, all China-born Chinese living overseas were given the official status of *huaqiao*. This was stipulated in the 1909 Chinese Nationality Law, adopted by the Qing government, which designates any person born of a Chinese father or mother as a Chinese citizen regardless of birthplace.⁶⁶ As Zhuang Guotu suggests, it was through this mandate in 1909 that China's interest in its overseas subjects found legal expression.⁶⁷ Also under the direction of the Qing government, various consulates were established in a bid to recruit the support of the Chinese people for China's economic development. A primary concern for the consulate was to promote Chinese education and culture. For instance, in an interview held in 1898 with Mr. Lew Yuk Lin, a General at the consulate, he was reported to have said that 'a school is to be started in Singapore to provide Chinese education for two different classes of students, namely, children and grown-up people.'⁶⁸ Lew's remarks here demonstrate the Chinese government's attempts to promote a national and cultural identity through education. What his account also reveals is the role of the consulate and the Consul, whose job on behalf of the Chinese government was to safeguard the interests of the *huaqiaos* at large, and to maintain political and social relations between the diaspora and China.

⁶⁶ Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, p.99. With regard to the Straits-born Chinese, there is no clear account of the implications of the Nationality Law of 1909 on this diasporic group. However, my research on *The Straits Chinese Magazine* suggests that the Straits-born Chinese were precluded from the Nationality Law by virtue of an Ordinance laid down earlier by the colonial government which stipulated that the Straits-born Chinese were British subjects. In an essay published in 1899 and entitled 'Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?', Song Ong Siang calls attention to Section 8 of the Naturalisation Ordinance (VIII. of 1867), which postulates that all Straits-born Chinese are 'natural born subjects of Her Majesty', and 'therefore owe allegiance to the British Queen'. The Ordinance sets out clearly the nationality of the Straits-born Chinese within the colony. Song also recognises in the essay the complications that could arise should the Nationality Law of 1909 be applied to the Straits-born Chinese, whom, he says, 'by the common law of England [are] natural born British subjects'. Bearing in mind that Song's account was published in 1899, and the Chinese Nationality Law became legally effective only in 1909, what the essay suggests is that the question of nationality for the Straits-born Chinese had been somewhat contentious even prior to the mandate laid down by the Chinese government. See Song Ong Siang, 'Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.3 No.10, June 1899, pp.61-67.

⁶⁷ Zhuang Guotu, 'China's policies towards overseas Chinese' in Lynn Pan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.99.

Thus, through the enactment of the 1909 Nationality Law and the efforts of the Chinese Consul, the term *huaqiao*, as Wang maintains, 'had become a politically loaded one popularised in order to encourage the Chinese so described to be loyal and patriotic towards China.'⁶⁹ This politicisation of the *huaqiaos* is evidence of Paul Gilroy's argument that 'identity', as a concept, can be manipulated for political reasons.⁷⁰ For a people to share an identity, as Gilroy suggests, is for them to be bonded on the most fundamental levels of the 'national', 'racial', 'ethnic', and 'regional'. Using the work of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Gilroy argues that 'identity' is a critical element in political life and theory, where even disorganised and internally divided groups can form a coherent unit that is capable of unified action. In this sense of the term, 'identity' thus becomes a question of power and authority, where a shared 'identity' can be used as a means of unifying a group or community, and where the particular group or community seeks to realise its sense of self and belonging in political form, for instance as a nation or a class. For the China-born Chinese, the *huaqiao* identity brought about a form of ethnic and nationalist binding, with reference to their *jia xiang*, but also to their dislocated grouping. This is because the term *huaqiao* refers to one single body of Chinese who went out to promote a greater awareness of Chinese culture and national needs.⁷¹

Yet, inevitably, there was a degree of irony in the loyalty of the China-born Chinese who paid allegiance to the government of their *jia xiang* but at the same

⁶⁸ 'An Interview with Mr. Lew Yuk Lim' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, p.104.

⁶⁹ Wang Gungwu, 'Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia' in *Sojourners and Settlers*, p.3.

⁷⁰ Paul Gilroy, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ Wang Gungwu, *China and the Overseas Chinese*, p.6.

time lived within the British colony. Nevertheless, the politicisation of *huaqiao* was crucial and ground-breaking as a form of official recognition by the authorities in China of its people abroad. It provided a means 'through which Chinese governments could protect Chinese migrants and intervene in overseas Chinese affairs.'⁷² The significance of *huaqiao* meant that, politically, the China-borns were now able to maintain formal links with their *jia xiang* and pay due allegiance to their Emperor. The term therefore serves a specific purpose in raising patriotic feelings amongst the diaspora, and nationalist sentiments were utilised by the Chinese government at crucial periods for political reasons. This is evident particularly during the Chinese people's attempt to overthrow the Manchu government in the 1911 revolution, whereby a more pronounced China-oriented identity became obvious in the way the *huaqiaos* reacted to Chinese nationalism.

In response to China's worsening political fortune under the government of the Manchus, China-born revolutionaries emerged during the period of the 1911 revolution as anti-Manchu sentiments brewed amongst the people. Their aim was to remove the Manchu government by force, thereby saving their *jia xiang*.⁷³ Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, a China-born Chinese residing in Singapore, led the first revolutionary movement against the Manchu government, aided by financial contribution from the majority of the community, as Yong has written:

The Chinese in Singapore, like their counterparts in other parts of Southeast Asia, responded vigorously to the causes of both the reformists and revolutionaries by donating funds, organising political

⁷² *ibid.*, p.8.

⁷³ Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.xxiii.

clubs and parties and spreading political ideas among their compatriots.⁷⁴

Under the influence of the revolutionaries, fervent nationalist support spread quickly throughout the diaspora.⁷⁵ The deep-seated patriotism of the China-born Chinese to their *jia xiang* found expressions in the formation of political groups within the public sphere of the diaspora. The *kuomintang* (KMT), *Tung Meng-hui*, the Nanyang Communist Party, and the Communist Youth League are a few of the many examples.⁷⁶ These organisations served to rally members of the diaspora to the cause of China, whereby members were furnished with political literature of a propagandist nature so that they could better serve the cause.⁷⁷ In addition, the mobilisation of the press was also instrumental in the spread of political ideas. Some of the early Chinese newspapers, such as the *Chong Shing Yit Pao* (1907-1910), the *Kok Min Jit Poh* (1914-1919), and the *Nanayang Siang Pau* (1923-1941), were particularly influential during the period leading up to and after the revolution.

One of the most effective and influential implementations in propagating the nationalist sentiments of the China-born Chinese during the 1911 revolution, was also the leaders of the China-born community themselves. These leaders were largely composed of popular and influential businessmen, and between the years 1906 and 1941, ninety-percent of them were, significantly, China-born Chinese.⁷⁸ They had come directly from China, were educated in the Chinese language, and tended to inculcate their political loyalties in the diasporic Chinese in order to advance the

⁷⁴ C.F. Yong, *op. cit.*, p.83.

⁷⁵ Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.xxiii.

⁷⁶ C.F. Yong, *op. cit.*, p.84.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.86.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

cause of China. Moreover, as Yong suggests, 'the fact that these leaders enjoyed little political power under the Colonial rule may well have been responsible for their readiness to advance the cause of China.'⁷⁹ One such prominent leader was the wealthy entrepreneur Tan Kah Kee. Like many China-born persons of his time, Tan epitomised the vibrant image of two generations of *huaqiaos* responding to the reformation and revolution of China.⁸⁰ Deeply influenced by the ideals of Chinese nationalism, Tan's political passion was ignited during the 1911 revolution and remained unaltered in its aftermath. Under his leadership, the China-born Chinese rendered immense spiritual and financial support to China, where a sum of S\$120 000 for instance, was raised for the maintenance of law and order in the fukien province of China. The Singapore China Relief Fund (1937-1946) and the China Relief Fund Union (1938-1949) were also set up and headed by Tan.⁸¹ In addition, between 1937 and 1942, the Chinese nationals residing in Southeast Asia were thought to have donated a total of 400 million renminbi towards China's ailing economy. In Singapore, the loyalty of the China-born Chinese towards their natal land was apparent with the mobilisation of 30 affiliated local committees and over 300 branches to aid the collection of donations.⁸² This was a clear testimony not only of Tan's influence but of the fierce loyalty of the China-borns toward their homeland.

The *huaqiaos*, thus motivated by the political and economic difficulties in their *jia xiang*, became actively nationalistic towards their homeland. Another significant manifestation of this nationalism is the 'Anti-Manchu Song of Revolution' which appealed to the patriotism of the China-born Chinese:

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p.136.

Let me call again to the hua-chiiiao overseas
 Compatriots to the distant ends of the earth!
 Only because of the need to feed yourself
 Did you leave home to wander the seas ...
 You are no mandarin back in your native home.
 Your descendants remain inferior to others
 Without protection none can get very far ...
 What use is the accumulation of silver cash?
 Why not use it to eject the Manchus?
 Ten thousand each from you isn't much
 To buy cannons and guns and ship them inland
 Buy a hundred thousand quick-loading rifles
 Aimed at Peking with easy success!
 The Manchu barbarians destroyed, peace will then surely follow, ... ⁸³

The lyrics reveal the anti-Manchu sentiments that were prevalent during the 1911 revolution, and serve as a form of national anthem for the China-borns during the period. Benedict Anderson has discussed the significance of anthems as a cultural production of nationalism through music. As Anderson says of all anthems, 'no matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity.'⁸⁴ This experience of uttering (as well as listening to) the same verses to the same melody at the same time, suggests a kind of unisonality, and a physical realisation of the imagined community. In a similar way, the lyrics of the 'Anti-Manchu Song of Revolution' exhort members of the diaspora to act upon their loyalty for the Chinese government for the sake of the "greater" community of a unified Chinese nation. The song refers to the China-borns as 'compatriots', and "invites" them all to unite against the Manchus. It is clear from the point of view of the revolutionaries that the politicisation of these diasporic subjects, coupled with the subjects' own visceral

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.144.

⁸² *ibid.*, p.143-145.

⁸³ Robin Cohen, *op. cit.*, p.88.

⁸⁴ Benedict Anderson, *op. cit.*, p.145.

attachment to their *jia xiang*, is an effective means of fostering patriotic sentiments, as well as inspiring revolutionary activity amongst the community.

It is apparent, therefore, that Chinese nationalist sentiments had spilled over into the space of the diaspora. The impact of Chinese nationalism on the China-born people was such that even during the period following the revolution, which saw China come under the rule of the republican government represented by the KMT party, nationalistic sentiments continued to galvanise them. Under the guidance of Sun Yat-sen, nationalist propaganda was brought to the overseas Chinese schools via the various branch organisations of the KMT party,⁸⁵ while the work of Sun and his party helped foster patriotic sentiments amongst the China-borns in the diaspora. As a result, their relationship with the *jia xiang* became more profound and similarly, with the Chinese government it was further strengthened.

Furthermore, the politicisation of the China-born Chinese is evidence of Gilroy's argument that identity can become a form of power and authority when a diasporic community seeks to realise it in a political form. According to him, this notion of identity as an entity of power and authority is usually wielded against oppressive groups in the host country where the diaspora resides. The diaspora's sense of a shared identity and exclusiveness binds them together, and offers a platform for social solidarity within the host nation. As Gilroy argues, a common identity can unify even a disorganised and internally divided group, and make it capable of communal action.⁸⁶ A similar concept of identity is at work in the Chinese situation, albeit in a

⁸⁵ David Yen-ho Wu, *op. cit.*, p.152.

⁸⁶ Paul Gilroy, *op. cit.*, p.302.

different political arena, where the China-borns have shown, through their participation in the 1911 revolution, that although they were divided by linguistic and dialect differences, they were at once united by a communal yearning for their *jia xiang*, and were loyal to the Chinese government. In fact, the revolution of 1911 illustrates members of the community have come to share an identity that is defined in ‘racial’, national and ethnic terms. In that sense, *huaqiaos* could be seen to embody a distinct form of identity which is perceived by Wang as a ‘Chinese nationalist identity’.⁸⁷ It is appropriately called ‘nationalist’ because it emphasises the way native origins, ethnic loyalties, and national affinities all help to sustain the notion of “Chineseness”.

The maintenance, restoration, and prosperity of the *jia xiang* were not only the key means of mobilising the China-born Chinese, but a vital support to the success of the 1911 Revolution which contributed to the making of China as a modern nation-state.⁸⁸ As the Qing dynasty began to weaken under the pressure of the revolutionaries, there was a simultaneous increase in nationalist sentiments among the China-borns in the diaspora, which demonstrates their obvious willingness to involve themselves in Chinese politics to an increasing degree.⁸⁹ For example, the contribution of affluent individuals in financial remittances, the rallying of people to political clubs and parties, the teaching of the Chinese National Language in schools, and the spreading of nationalist ideas and ideologies in Chinese newspapers, all testified to the subsequent rise of Chinese nationalism within the diaspora.⁹⁰ Wang’s research on the reactions of the community toward the 1911 revolution is self-explanatory when he writes:

⁸⁷ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.199.

⁸⁸ Robin Cohen, *op. cit.*, p.89. Details of the 1911 revolution can be found in Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.25.

⁹⁰ C.F. Yong, *op. cit.*, pp.84-87.

On the whole, many of them gave the impression of being transients who looked far more to China and did not care to identify with the areas they lived in, and this was especially obvious in the way some Chinese seem to have responded to Chinese nationalism.⁹¹

That the China-born Chinese 'looked far more to China' and 'gave the impression of being transients', as Wang suggests above, confirms Gilroy's argument that when a people come to imagine that they share an identity that is manifested in 'racial', national and ethnic groupings, it can lead to bloody conflicts over belonging and nationality.⁹² In other words, the power and authority of a shared identity is such that members of an ethnic group are prepared to sacrifice their lives, or those of others, for what they perceive to be a threat to their identity. In the case of the China-borns, the *jia xiang* is probably the only possession they would fiercely protect, and as Yen Ching Hwang writes, '[m]any of the overseas Chinese were patriots', and their patriotism was 'partly a concern for their kith and kin and their places of birth in China, and partly a concern for the fate of China as a whole'.⁹³ It is this solidarity amongst kith and kin that serves to maintain and promote the *huaqiao* mentality of many migrants who yearned to return eventually to their *jia xiang* in China. The China-born Chinese during the nineteenth century were completely united in their passionate attachment to their *jia xiang* and remained committed to their native village, clan, and language. As Pan has observed, '[f]or commitment to one's native place, one's ancestral home, few people could beat the Chinese.'⁹⁴

⁹¹ Wang Gungwu, *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1981, p.142.

⁹² Paul Gilroy, *op. cit.*, p.310.

⁹³ Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.xvii.

⁹⁴ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.21.

The nationalist underpinning of the term *huaqiao* is therefore enacted through the 1911 revolution and it is clear that '[a]ll Chinese, wherever they were, were part of the Chinese nation.'⁹⁵ Within the larger context of colonial rule, such political and nationalist principles meant that the primary loyalty of the China-born Chinese was to their *jia xiang*. That they pledged their allegiance to China and to the Qing government at once negated the British claims to their loyalty within the colony. The politicised nature of the *huaqiao* identity meant that there were times when it became impossible for the colonial government to ignore the aggressively chauvinistic and revolutionary characteristics of the diaspora. The reality is that these people were capable of passionate nationalistic sentiments, a side to the community which did not adhere to the stereotypical image inscribed within colonial discourses discussed earlier in Chapter One, which depicted the diaspora as a supine and non-political people motivated only by mercantile and monetary concerns. Wang writes that 'the entrepreneurial, hardworking and law-abiding Chinese' were transformed in the eyes of the foreign and colonial governments 'into chauvinists who might be agents for the Chinese government.'⁹⁶

The China-borns' role in the revolution clearly demonstrates how members of the community were able to forge a Chinese nationalist identity despite their geographical distance from China. This suggests a diasporic identity that is geared towards China as a geopolitical centre, where the nature of being Chinese has intense political associations with the Chinese government. The willingness of those people to participate in patriotic activities signals a Chinese identity that is inseparable from

⁹⁵ Wang Gungwu, *China and the Overseas Chinese*, p.8.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p.17.

China and Chinese nationalism. Perhaps it was also in response to the British preference for the Straits-born Chinese over them, creating a reactionary community that was anti-colonial and pro-nationalistic. Ultimately, what all these suggest is the extent to which China remains a powerful rallying call for particular subjects in the diaspora to gather and to address the fate of their troubled *jia xiang*. If being Chinese is defined in terms of a people's full participation in the economic, cultural, and political life of China's civilisation, then the China-born Chinese of the early diaspora certainly fulfil the conditions of such a definition.

“*Huaqiao*”, Sojourning, and the China-born Chinese.

The earlier section has discussed the concept of *huaqiao* as a political form of identity for the China-born Chinese. However, apart from the political implications of the concept of *huaqiao*, it also has cultural and historical significance that underpins the community's attachment to their *jia xiang*. The China-borns are sojourners and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term *huaqiao* was also used to refer to the Chinese sojourner who resided away from the *jia xiang*. The term carries historical and cultural implications that the English translation of 'sojourn' fails to capture. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of sojourn as 'a temporary stay', is too general a definition to encapsulate the cultural and ethnic specificities that the term *huaqiao* incorporates. *Huaqiao* is a compound of two elements: *hua* and *qiao*. *Hua* is a general ethnic marker which means "Chinese", while the term *qiao* means a temporary residence away from the home village, province or hometown, but

necessarily *within* China.⁹⁷ The definition of *qiao* is derived from a migration pattern that was established by Chinese traders, artisans, and miners within China itself.⁹⁸ This pattern of migration existed as far back as the Song dynasty during the eleventh century, during which period, it was common for the Chinese to travel from their *jia xiang* to another province within China.⁹⁹ These people were usually traders and artisans who left their *jia xiang* to earn a living.

Other common terms may also be used to refer to the travels of the *huaqiao*. Such terms include *luju* (*lu* meaning “travel” and *ju* meaning “stay”), *keju* (*ke* meaning “guest”), *yuju* (*yu* meaning “to reside away from home”), and *jiju* (*ji* meaning “to lodge”).¹⁰⁰ What is significant about these appellations is that they not only allude to the notion of travelling, but they refer to it specifically. Wang writes that ‘[w]hen no one would voluntarily leave home, everyone who did so was deemed merely to be sojourning’.¹⁰¹ If there was a need for a sojourner to stay away from his *jia xiang* longer than was common, then an alternative term *liuyu* (meaning an uncertain period of drifting and wandering away from home) would be used to delineate this subject. What is interesting is that all the terms described above refer to the idea of sojourn rather than migration. Moreover, they all refer implicitly to the *huaqiao*’s attachment to an original point of dispersal. The definitions of *luju*, *keju*, *yuju*, and *jiju* indicate the high social and cultural value assigned by Chinese society to the *jia xiang*, and to the sojourner returning “home” following his stay abroad.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p.5.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ I use the word ‘*jia xiang*’ in this paragraph in its more constricted usage, as referring specifically to one’s province or village (as opposed to China as a whole). This is because during the Song dynasty, the travels undertaken by the Chinese were contained within China itself.

¹⁰⁰ Wang Gungwu, ‘Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia’ in *Sojourner and Settlers*, p.4.

The China-born Chinese have always preferred to sojourn rather than migrate because of the stigma that is attached by Chinese society to the idea of migration, which they term *yimin*. This term is derived from two phrases: *yimin shibian* (the movement of people to border areas to support military colonies), or *yimin tongcai* (the movement of people to ease economic conditions, usually because of famine or other natural calamities).¹⁰² Both phrases describe the forcible removal of people by the authorities to alternative homes elsewhere, while the term *yimin* implies a forced removal of people from their *jia xiang* by officials. In these circumstances, the Chinese regard migration not as a voluntary act but as a great evil or calamity to be avoided; as a forced departure that occurs only when necessary because of some adversity or natural disaster.¹⁰³ Moreover, the term *yimin* is also linked to the negative terms *liumin* and *nanmin*. ‘*Liumin*’ refers to the idea of displaced or homeless persons wandering about in search for a place to settle, and carries a negative connotation because it refers to anyone whose anti-social behaviour and irresponsible acts have led to their homeless state. Such people are considered outcasts of society, vagrants, or even fugitives. The latter term *nanmin* refers particularly to refugees, and the term connotes distress and anxiety. Thus, the Chinese always prefer to be associated with the idea of *qiao* (sojourn) rather than *yimin* (migration).

For the reasons described above, the China-born Chinese perceive their migration to the host state as only a temporary leave from their *jia xiang* rather than

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p.3.

a permanent departure.¹⁰⁴ As Song Ong Siang writes in 1898, the China-born immigrants ‘generally succeed in acquiring some measure of prosperity’ during their stay in the host country, and would thereafter ‘return to spend the remainder of their lives in their native town or village.’¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the common aim of the China-born coolie during the nineteenth century was to make their fortune in the diaspora and then return to China. This was also the case for merchants and their employees who needed to travel abroad to protect their business interests. The term *huashang* describes a Chinese trader.¹⁰⁶ Merchants and traders who for business purposes needed to sojourn abroad in overseas ports and cities would maintain their connection to their *jia xiang*, and wherever they were, they retained their links to it and to their families in the homeland. Wang explains that ‘[m]ost returned regularly to China even though many would have had second families and homes abroad. The China-born Chinese had no need for a concept like migration under such circumstances’.¹⁰⁷

As sojourners, many Chinese migrants regarded themselves as essentially transient and carried with them a sense of impermanence about their status as migrants.¹⁰⁸ For them, the “home” in the diaspora is a mobile habitat, a temporary

¹⁰⁴ Chapter Four will show that quite often diasporic subjects such as the China-born Chinese thrive on discourses of sojourn and “return”, but postpone the return. The desire [to return], as Tololyan suggests, is considered a necessary part of the definition of ‘diaspora’. However, as Tololyan also goes on to say, this theoretical insistence on the diaspora’s return is not always taken literally to mean an intent to return. In which case, the perception of migration as a sojourn is perhaps an ideological strategy undertaken by the China-born Chinese to negotiate an in-between position in the host-nation as being “half-there” and “half elsewhere”. Khachig Tololyan, *op. cit.*, p.14.

¹⁰⁵ Song Ong Siang, ‘Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?’, *op. cit.*, p.61.

¹⁰⁶ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.* It is important to be reminded here, as discussed earlier in the chapter, that there was a hierarchy within the China-born Chinese community based on class and longevity of stay. While the majority of China-born Chinese were coolies, there was also a minority who were traders and merchants.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁰⁸ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.107.

place of dwelling. The father in Yu's short story, for instance, perceives his stay in the settlement as temporary. The narrator says that, '[a]fter fifty years in Singapore, 'home' for him was still Szechuan.'¹⁰⁹ Such an attitude to transience was common, especially with pioneering China-born Chinese who harboured mixed feelings about their continued stay in the settlement. Rootlessness, alienation, and helplessness are salient characteristics that describe the collective psyche of the China-born father. Mishra defines this characteristic of diaspora as the 'diasporic imaginary', where an ethnic enclave in a nation-state defines itself, either consciously or unconsciously, as a group that lives in displacement.¹¹⁰

Yu's writing is a good illustration of Mishra's argument of the 'diasporic imaginary'. In her story, the father internalises the feelings of alienation and rootlessness from living in the diaspora, and reproduces them in 'the poems he writes in Chinese about living in exile.'¹¹¹ The poems are expressions of the father's China origins and immigrant status, and he himself is evidence of Mishra's argument that members of the diaspora feel partly alienated and insulated from the host society and believe that they cannot be fully accepted by it. As far as the father is concerned, he does not want to be received into the host country, and perceives his migration as only temporary. Yu's father chooses not to, and is unwilling to assimilate into the host society. This sense of displacement and exile, according to Edward Said, is inevitably

¹⁰⁹ Ovidia Yu, *op. cit.*, p.162.

¹¹⁰ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.*, p.423.

¹¹¹ Ovidia Yu, *op. cit.*, p.164.

ingrained in all migrants as a consequence of their crossing of geographical and cultural borders.¹¹²

In response to Said, Abdul JanMohammed has provided an analysis of the nature of border crossings and the migrant subject. In his essay on 'border intellectual', JanMohammed describes what he perceives as the 'exile' or the so-called "alienated" subject. According to him, an 'exile' can be defined in a relation of difference to say, an 'immigrant'. While both the exile and the immigrant are involved in border crossings from one national group to another, 'the exile's stance toward the new host culture is negative, the immigrant's positive.'¹¹³ Thus, while the exile remains 'indifferent to the values and characteristics of the host culture', the immigrant is often 'eager to discard with deliberate speed the formative influences of his or her own culture and to take on the values of the new culture.'¹¹⁴

In this context, JanMohammed argues that the immigrant, unlike the exile, identifies rapidly and attempts to merge with the structure of the new culture's collective subjectivity. Following this formulation, the father in Yu's story can be said to embody the characteristics of the exile in that he is unwilling to assimilate in the new culture and remains displaced in the host society. In fact, like the exile, the father chooses not to fully identify with the new culture and is not a participant in the host

¹¹² Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile' in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (eds.), *Out There, Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990, p.365 cited in Iain Chambers, *op. cit.*, p.2.

¹¹³ Abdul JanMohammed, *op. cit.*, p.101. Besides the exile and immigrant, JanMohammed also distinguishes two other subjects of border crossings: the colonialist and the scholar. The latter, he says, can be typified by the anthropologist studying other cultures, the tourist, or the traveller. Like the exile and immigrant, both the colonialist and the scholar cross cultural borders. However, for the colonialist and the scholar, the host culture remains ultimately an object of attention, and the former's

society. Rather, he remains on its margins, and is motivated by a nostalgia for his original culture and “home” left behind in Szechuan. Like JanMohammed’s theory of the exile, William Safran also argues that diasporic subjects do not identify with the host country and ‘regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return.’¹¹⁵ As the father in Yu’s story has demonstrated, to regard one’s emigration to another country as a temporary absence from the homeland is an attitude common to many China-born Chinese in the diaspora. This sense of temporality and the diasporic subject is captured in the Chinese proverb *luo ye gui gen* (“falling leaves return to their roots”), which suggests that the wandering subject nourishes and is nourished by native China, the implied tree of the proverb.¹¹⁶ The Chinese abroad, as the saying goes, are as fallen leaves who, wherever they are, would eventually return to their native roots in China. The words of the proverb are powerful because they work with the organic metaphors of ‘soil’ and ‘roots’ so that the return to China for the Chinese person is a natural rather than a social process.

Pan writes that ‘many awaited the day when they could return to their villages in swank after making good - or, to put it in the Chinese way, ‘go home in silken robes’.¹¹⁷ This was especially the case for many China-born migrants with dependants in China who relied on their remittances as a primary or secondary means of

gaze upon the object, unlike that of the exile and the immigrant, is ‘panoptic and thus dominating’ (p.102).

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.101.

¹¹⁵ William Safran, *op. cit.*, pp.83-83.

¹¹⁶ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.21. It is also interesting to note that the Chinese-American author, Adeline Yen Mah, has written an autobiographical novel entitled *Falling Leaves*. Based on the proverb *luo ye gui gen*, *Falling Leaves* is an account of Yen’s childhood as she returns to her place of birth in China. See Adeline Yen Mah, *Falling Leaves*, London: Penguin Books, 1997.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

subsistence. By retaining their connections with their relatives in the homeland, these China-borns were able to fulfil their familial and patriotic obligations, thus demonstrating that a person's devotion to his *jia xiang* was an extension of his filial piety.

The Meaning of “Home” and Identity for the Straits-born Chinese.

So far, this chapter has discussed the identity of the China-born Chinese and their affiliations with the homeland. It began by showing that they are *huaqiaos* who derived a sense of belonging and identity from their identification with their *jia xiang* in China. The chapter studied the origins of the term *huaqiao*, and the extent to which sojourning had been a common practice for the Chinese migrant. The concept of *huaqiao* suggests an identity that is attached to China as the geopolitical centre. As Wang says, the China-born Chinese are conscious of their family system, their place of origin in China, and their ties with others of the same ethnicity whether in China or in other parts of the region.¹¹⁸

This section continues to study the early diaspora by looking now at the identity of the Straits-born Chinese. The meaning of “home” for the China-borns and the Straits Chinese cannot be envisaged in any unified or uniform way. The earlier section has shown that the concept of *jia xiang* is a salient symbol of the China-born's identity.¹¹⁹ Sheffer, Conner and Safran suggest that a preoccupation with natal (or

¹¹⁸ Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas*, p.199.

¹¹⁹ ‘Identity’ here refers to the interaction of race, class, gender, and religion, the network of relationships, and the discursive practices of inclusion and exclusion that help to form the building blocks of the diaspora's sense of selfhood and belonging.

imagined natal) ownership and belonging is necessary in the construction of the diaspora's identity. Yet, while the *jia xiang* in China is a fundamental part of how the China-born Chinese comprehend their identity, the idea of "home" takes on a different meaning for their Straits-born counterparts.

Aiwah Ong, in an essay entitled 'On the Edge of Empire: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora,' says that 'the meanings of motherland, country, and family, have for a long time been discontinuous and even contradictory'.¹²⁰ Following Ong, the notion of "Chineseness" as a whole is contentious and fractured. This is best captured in the differences between the two diasporic groups, and their conceptions of "home" and identity. For the China-borns, the concept of *jia xiang* suggests an essentialist identity and one that is fixed on China as a geopolitical and cultural referent. For the Straits-borns, however, the concept of "Chineseness" is a relational one in the sense that it is not confined to an essentialist or fixed notion. This section argues that it is ultimately a matter of subjective identification and there is no single notion of a Chinese identity. For the Straits-borns, "China" had ceased to become the geopolitical centre. The concept of "home" for them becomes an open signifier which takes on a multitude of meanings and forms, where the idea of a "homeland" and what it represents becomes, as it were, a symbolic structure that resists any fixative or uniform interpretation.

¹²⁰ Aiwah Ong, 'On the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora' in *Positions* 1(3), Winter, 1993, p.753.

For the Straits-born Chinese, “Chineseness” or the meaning of being Chinese, is not definitive or grounded in China as a geopolitical centre, as demonstrated in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in 1899:

Suppose a conscription system was introduced for Chinese military service, and the Straits-born Chinese were commanded by the Chinese Government to return to China for the purpose aforesaid, how many of them would voluntarily and in a patriotic spirit obey the command? And should any threat be held out for disobedience or any pressure be brought to bear on them, the most probable result would be to drive the Straits-born Chinese to seek for admission into the political citizenship of England, France, Russia and other European Powers.¹²¹

The above excerpt is written by the local writer Song Ong Siang, a Straits Chinese intellectual that resided in the diaspora at the turn of the century. Song was a British-trained lawyer at Cambridge, and as a product of English education, he was concerned with the political and legal status of the Straits-born Chinese as a whole, viz a viz the British authorities, and this is evident from his article above entitled ‘Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?’. As a leader and spokesman for the community, Song’s rhetorical question in the essay demonstrates that his attitude and that of his community in general towards China, as opposed to the rest of the diaspora, is, at the least, ambivalent. In the passage, Song presents a hypothetical situation where a conscription system is introduced and the Straits-borns are required to serve the Chinese government in military service. He then calls into the question the patriotic spirit of the community in complying with this conscription when he asks ‘[h]ow many of them would voluntarily and in a patriotic spirit obey the command?’ In addition, further on in the essay, the indifference of the community toward China is made more

¹²¹ Song Ong Siang, ‘Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, p.65.

explicit when Song states that the China-borns 'are Chinese subjects and owe political allegiance to the Emperor of China', and that the Straits-borns, on the contrary, are 'naturalised British subjects, and though they are of Chinese race, they owe political allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen.'¹²²

The narrative above is therefore evidence that unlike most immigrant China-born Chinese, the Straits-born Chinese tended to pledge allegiance to the Crown. C.F. Yong describes this as a 'British-oriented loyalty' and distinguishes it from a 'China-oriented' one.¹²³ The Straits Chinese paid allegiance to the British government, and they embodied an identity based on concepts of cultural and historical fulfilment rather than on the more conventional notions of nationality and citizenship that many of the China-born *huaqiaos* had claimed. In fact, from 1900 to 1941, Yong records that the loyalty of the Straits-borns was towards the British.¹²⁴ This is revealed on various occasions which demonstrated the community's attachment to Britain. In 1900, for instance, the Straits Chinese rallied volunteers from the community in a bid to provide military support of the British in the South African War.¹²⁵ In another instance, in the later part of the century, World War One also 'saw the Straits-born Chinese community in Singapore fully committed to the British cause.'¹²⁶ During these periods, many in this diasporic group identified with the colonial authorities. Wang has written:

¹²² *ibid.*, p.62.

¹²³ C.F. Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore*, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992, p.82.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p.88.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

Certainly those born in the region and known locally as Baba Chinese, who were English educated and worked closely with the British, came to believe that they were fortunate to live under the British. British citizenship and protection became increasingly meaningful and they came to value their connection with Britain, even to the extent of placing British interests above those of China, certainly the China of the declining Manchu dynasty.¹²⁷

Wang suggests that the Straits-borns seek to identify with the British, and their new found loyalty is to local politics and to the authority of the colonial government. It would seem that they wanted to be part of the host nation wherever possible. The fact that they worked closely with the British and perceived themselves as fortunate to live under the colonial regime showed that they were at home in the colony, and accepted the constitutional and political framework of the colonial government. Moreover, as Chapter One has foregrounded, the Straits-born Chinese were also permanent residents in the host settlement by birth, and were acculturated within the local community. They had voluntarily severed their political relationship with China, and as locals, had opted to settle down in the host nation. In 1898 for instance, an article published in the local *Straits Chinese Magazine* reveals that the Straits-born Chinese affirm 'their undoubted rights as British subjects',¹²⁸ and this is demonstrated by the formation of a Volunteer corps, initiated by the Straits-born community to 'take up arms in defence of the Empire and of their homestead.' Furthermore, in 1897, another article in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* refers to the Straits-born Chinese as 'that class which regards Singapore as its home and native place'.¹²⁹ The excerpts above thus clearly demonstrate the political dis-affiliations of the China-borns to the colony, and show

¹²⁷ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.171.

¹²⁸ 'News and Notes' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.2 No.6 June 1898, p.75.

¹²⁹ Song Ong Siang, 'The Position of Chinese Women' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, March 1897, Vol 1 No. 1, p.20.

that the two diasporic groups remain profoundly distinct in their perceptions of “home” and identity.

For the Straits-born Chinese, “China”, the imagined and mythicised ancestral land, had thus stopped being the centre of “Chineseness”. Instead, the notion of “home” became an open signifier which took on a separate form and meaning, and is inconsistent with and contradictory to the China-borns. Safran’s argument that diasporas perceive their homeland as their true and ideal home highlights the pertinent question of how diasporic subjects see themselves to be a part of their homeland as the sphere of natal belonging. Yet, while his concept of ‘diaspora’ successfully engages with the discourse of “home” as a salient characteristic, what his definition has failed to account for is that the meaning of an ethnic homeland is relative to the particular diasporic community. Safran, in his definition, is too quick in preconceiving a collective diasporic identification with an imagined or real “homeland”. The fact that the Straits-borns do not emphasise the same cultural and political features as symbols of Chinese identity proves contrary to Safran’s argument. What this demonstrates is that the same geographical and psychic space of the “homeland” can also have different interpretations for different diasporic groups. Indeed, if the meaning of ‘homeland’ entails loyalty to the Chinese ethnic culture and traditional values, then attachment to *jia xiang* for the Chinese community in general was never a question. Both the China-born Chinese and Straits-born Chinese were fervent in their affiliation to China as a cultural hearth. However, if the meaning of ‘homeland’ is defined on national as well as political terms, then the Straits-born Chinese allegiance to China is more problematic. This is because China itself, as Pan explains, ‘no longer meant much to the *Babas*, and they had little truck with the dialect associations and secret societies

which formed so much a part of the [China-born] Chinese scene.’¹³⁰ The fact that the Straits-borns are indifferent to China as a geopolitical entity reflects the internal distinction between them and the rest of the diaspora. To suggest a universality of the diaspora’s attachment to a common “homeland” can therefore be misleading.

For the Straits-borns, “Chineseness”, or the meaning of being Chinese, is not definitive, or grounded in China as a particular geopolitical locale. Their identity and ethnicity is based on a different form of identification from the China-borns in that they identify with Chinese culture, rather than the nation-state of China. Chapter One has shown that despite their partially anglicised identity, the Straits-borns nonetheless defined themselves as Chinese and were defined by others as such. As the local writer Chia Cheng Sit writes of the community in 1898, ‘the “*Babas*” or Straits Chinese are in their thoughts and superstitions, in their manners, customs and habits essentially Chinese’,¹³¹ and this is evident in the way they continued to uphold certain Chinese customs, particularly with regard to ancestor worship, and persisted in the practice of the social and religious customs of their ancestors.¹³² In their ritual of ancestor worship, for instance, they continued to revere *Guandi* (the God of war) and *Guanyin* (the Goddess of mercy), two deities favoured by the Chinese community.¹³³ The festivals which the Straits Chinese observed, as Felix Chia suggests, were also ‘all of Chinese origin’, and during the “*Chap Go Meh*” or moon light festival, for instance, the Straits-born Chinese women would adorn the Chinese style of dress,

¹³⁰ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.170.

¹³¹ Chia Cheng Sit, *op. cit.*, p.11

¹³² Chapter 3 discusses in detail the ways in which the Straits-born Chinese adapt to their inherited Chinese heritage, as it is documented in the discourse of *The Straits Chinese Magazine*.

¹³³ Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, p.79.

complemented with 'a superabundant display of jewels.'¹³⁴ At the same time, the Straits-born Chinese embracing of the Chinese culture is also depicted in fictionalised form, through the autobiography of Bebe, where at every auspicious occasion and during every family crisis, the family would seek the supplication of the goddess. During Chinese New Year, for example, Mama and Mak Ee would do 'obseiance every morning before the Goddess of Mercy',¹³⁵ and when a member of the family was ill, offerings and prayers were also given to the *Guanyin* as forms of appeasement. The paraphernalia of prayers, joss sticks, papers, candles, oil and flowers were prepared and placed at the shrine of the goddess on behalf of the sickly individual.¹³⁶ As demonstrated through Bebe's family, the Straits-borns were therefore considered to be traditionally Chinese, especially in the areas of 'everyday customs and folk-religious rituals',¹³⁷ they continued to claim an ancestor in China and observe particular traditions of the ancestral culture. This shows that for them the meaning of being Chinese did not necessarily entail a political affinity to China or to the Chinese government.

For the diaspora, how its members relate to China, and how they mediate the possibilities of their multiple belongings, are thus very much structured and shifted along lines of national and geopolitical considerations. The terms *huaren* (person of Chinese origin) and *zhongguoren* (citizens of the Chinese state) designate the Straits-borns and the China-borns, respectively.¹³⁸ *Huaren* implies a Chinese identity embodied by the former that is connected to an ancestral and cultural identification

¹³⁴ *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.11 No.1 March 1907, p.32.

¹³⁵ Lynn Pan, *op. cit.*, p.16.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p.39.

¹³⁷ Lynn Pan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.206.

¹³⁸ Tu Wei-ming, *op. cit.*, p.25.

with China rather than one based on a geopolitical identification. The expression *zhongguoren*, on the other hand, designates a type of nationality embodied by the China-born Chinese that is grounded in China as the geopolitical centre, and as the nexus of a cultural and psychological order.

The political affinities of the Straits-borns thus reflect a different form of identification with “Chineseness” whereby the meaning of being Chinese does not necessarily entail an exclusive loyalty to the ancestral land. Due to their lack of ties with China, they also did not possess those institutions important to the rest of the China-born Chinese, such as the *huiguans* or clan associations. The absence of such links and associations reflects their ambivalent attitude toward China’s political and social problems, and their estrangement from the ancestral homeland. It is perhaps this ambivalence that challenges Safran’s argument which suggests that the identity of the diasporic subject is always framed around the natal origins and an eventual return to the homeland. According to Safran, diasporic subjects are situated on the periphery of the host society. They therefore ‘regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return - when conditions are appropriate.’¹³⁹ If Safran’s theory is used as a “model” of conceptualising diasporas, then the ambivalence of the Straits-born Chinese toward their ancestral land presents a clear deviation from the norm. While members of this group are culturally conscious of their Chinese heritage, they see little point in identifying with China in a geopolitical sense, and tend to be more involved in the politics of the local community. Moreover, by their history of settlement in the host society and assimilation into the indigenous community, they are impervious to the

prospect of an eventual return to China. This ambivalent attitude towards the ancestral land is important, not least because, as Avtar Brah suggests, 'not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return.'¹⁴⁰

Indeed, the Straits-born Chinese not only evoke political loyalties and solidarities that are contradictory to the China-born Chinese, but they also embody a cultural identity that stands in a relation of difference to the latter. Apart from being born locally, subjects of this group have departed from conventional notions of a Chinese identity insofar as they speak *Baba Malay* rather than Chinese, have been educated in the English language, and were in closer contact with British administrators than their China-born counterparts. Part Chinese, part Malay, and in a sense part English, the Straits-borns epitomise a different kind of Chinese ethnicity that has evolved from close contacts with the Malay and English cultures. It is an identity that represents a fusion of those various other cultures and one that has emerged from the socio-cultural demands of living in a culturally pluralistic society. The fact that the same period saw the China-born Chinese recoiling from hybridity in the conviction that the Chinese culture and heritage must be safe-guarded in its "purity",¹⁴¹ serves to accentuate the very eclectic nature of the Straits-borns' constitution.

¹³⁹ William Safran, *op. cit.*, p.16.

¹⁴⁰ Avtar Brah, *op. cit.*, p.180. See also James Clifford, 'Diasporas' in *Cultural Anthropology* 9(3), 1994, Clifford's thesis is also appropriate here as it provides a counter-analysis to Safran's model in suggesting that not all diasporic groups manifest an attachment to the homeland. Citing the Jewish people as an example, Clifford points out that a large segment of the Jewish diasporic community does not meet the requirement of Safran's theory which stipulates the diaspora's strong attachment to and the desire for return to the homeland. There is 'little room in [Safran's] definition for the principled *ambivalence* about physical return and attachment to land which has characterised much Jewish diasporic consciousness, from biblical times on.' (p.305) The implication of Clifford's argument is important, for it suggests that a strong tie to the past or to the ancestral land does not necessarily need to exist in order for a community to be defined as a diaspora.

¹⁴¹ By 'purity' here I mean the unmixed and unassimilated identity of the China-born Chinese.

That the Straits-borns and China-borns differ so widely thus demonstrates how complex and difficult it is to define a Chinese identity. This section has shown that the meanings of “home” and identity for subjects of the diaspora are founded on very different principles. Wang has written that the diasporic Chinese, ‘do not have a single identity but tend to assume multiple identities and that the whole range of identities they adopt must be taken into account if we wish to understand them’.¹⁴² The disparate political loyalties and identities of the two diasporic groups testify to the different meanings of being Chinese. Together, the experience of the Straits-born Chinese and China-born Chinese demonstrates how complex and conflicting the question of ethnic allegiance can be, and how difficult it is to draw a general conclusion about the degree and the nature of that ethnic allegiance even when it existed. This reality at once defines and disrupts the putative united identity of the diaspora, and challenges the notion of a single Chinese identity.

Towards Change and Assimilation: the Straits-born Chinese and the China-born Chinese during and beyond the 1950s.

It is also important to consider how several generations later, following the arrival of the pioneer China-born immigrants to the early diaspora, the idea of a Chinese identity can be marked out by the migrants’ gradual assimilation into the local Straits-born community. The sojourner mentality, which at one time defined the existence of the China-borns in terms of perpetual rootlessness and impermanence, underwent a major transformation during the 1950s. The reason for this is because an increasing number of China-borns went against the conventional ‘sojourner’ characteristic that the term *huaqiao* had previously implied. At the same time, the

¹⁴² Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.199.

sense of impermanence and displacement that was generally felt by the pioneer generation of Chinese immigrants was also gradually being overcome with the emergence of second and subsequent generations.¹⁴³ During the early diaspora, while the ambition of many China-born Chinese was to amass a fortune and then return to their *jia xiang*, there were also others who realised this ambition but chose instead to settle permanently in the diaspora. This was especially the case for many successful China-borns who dared not return to live in China, for those who 'return[ed] from the Straits with large fortunes had no protection in law from the extortion of the mandarin state.'¹⁴⁴ As the historian Wang Gungwu notes, the '*huaqiao* pattern lost its dominance after the 1950s', by which time the migration of China-born Chinese to the diaspora had almost come to an end.¹⁴⁵ Various factors brought about a change in the circumstances of these migrants in their transition from sojourners to settlers. The arrival of female immigrants from China for instance, precipitated a change in the constitution of the diasporic community. After the nineteenth century, as Yeo Song Nian asserts, 'Chinese women began to emigrate to Singapore in considerable numbers', and this was due to the Immigration Restriction Act of 1929 which permitted the unrestricted flow of females and children to the region.¹⁴⁶ The improved systems of migration toward the end of the century also made it more conducive for women to travel. In 1907, the ratio of males and females in the diaspora was recorded as 4:1. However, by 1937, the proportion of female immigrants rose by 41.35 per cent.¹⁴⁷ This steady growth of female immigrants is significant in bringing about a social change in the diaspora as a whole. The fact that

¹⁴³ Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, p.107.

¹⁴⁴ C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867*, p.35.

¹⁴⁵ Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas*, p.11.

¹⁴⁶ Yeo Song Nian, *op cit.*, p.176. See also Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, p.101.

there were more Chinese females in the settlement encouraged more male immigrants to marry and settle in Singapore, and it also 'reversed the growing trend of intermarriages between Chinese males and local women.'¹⁴⁸ To a large extent, the growth of the diaspora depended on these women, as the men who came as sojourners could now marry from their own community, rather than intermarry with the Malay or Straits-born Chinese women and lose their ethnic identity. The arrival of these female immigrants stimulated the growth of the diasporic community, and contributed to a steady increase in the number of local-borns.¹⁴⁹

As the pioneer generation of China-born Chinese became settlers in the host settlement, they too became assimilated into the ways of the Straits-born community, and were integrated into the local one. A large proportion of them began to settle down in Singapore within a few years of their arrival. By the middle of the century, as Wang suggests, there appeared to be 'hundreds of settled families, including those who had come from China and either intermarried with the settled families, or entered into business partnerships with them.'¹⁵⁰ Demographic data shows that between 1921 and 1957, the proportion of Chinese people who were born locally in the host nation steadily rose from 24 to 68 percent.¹⁵¹ The fact that the population of Chinese descendants continued to rise in the diaspora meant that it was likely that those who were born locally in the host nation, or whose families had lived in the country for many generations, generally tended to identify themselves with the adopted country. This being the case then, the immigrant and sojourner statuses that had at one time

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Yen Ching Hwang, *op. cit.*, p.6.

¹⁴⁹ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.174.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.175.

defined the existence and identity of the China-born Chinese were to undergo a major transformation.

Thus, towards the 1950s, the picture of the China-borns as immigrants had to be tempered with another picture of them as settlers. Census data further demonstrates that in 1959, approximately two-thirds of Chinese in Singapore were local born,¹⁵² and this showed that the aggressively nationalistic and revolutionary term *huaqiao* which was used to designate the China-born Chinese residing overseas as nationals of China had begun to fade away.¹⁵³ While the early generations of this diasporic group may be defined as *huaqiaos*, this concept soon became inappropriate to describe their descendants who were born and brought up in the host nation. The *huaqiao* identity was (re)invented to exclude its political connotations and, in its stead, the term *huaren* (ethnic Chinese) was used to refer to all people of Chinese descent, including the Straits-borns, who saw themselves as Chinese but who no longer identified with geopolitical China. The shying away from the use of the term *huaqiao* allowed for a new Chinese identity that was to emerge in the aftermath of the settlement's independence from Britain. This process of change over the generations from *huaqiaos* to local-borns is illustrated by a popular Hokkien saying: *sa dai sheng ba*, a saying used by many Chinese settlers in the diaspora to mean that in three generations, a China-born migrant will become a *baba*, or local born.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Chiew Seen Kong, 'From Overseas Chinese to Chinese Singaporeans' in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, Singapore: Saik Wah Press, 1997, p.214.

¹⁵² Chiew Seen Kong, *op. cit.*, p.213.

¹⁵³ It was also in the 1950s that this notion of a *huaqiao* identity was thought to have lost its dominance. Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.11.

¹⁵⁴ David Yen-ho Wu, *op. cit.*, p.160.

Indeed, as the population of the diaspora began to increase during the 1950s, the early diaspora underwent a significant change with the rise of indigenous nationalistic and anti-colonial sentiments. A large number of Chinese from the two communities tended to identify themselves with the host nation rather than with China or the colonial government. It was during this period that the meaning of being “diasporic Chinese” created a level of political significance that had never before existed. The turning of China to communism in 1949, and the independence of Singapore in 1959, were the main reasons which motivated members of the Chinese community to identify with the host settlement. Referring to the diasporic Chinese, the sociologist Chiew Seen Kong writes, ‘legally and politically, they had renounced their Chinese citizenship, and were no more overseas Chinese’, rather, as Singapore citizens, ‘they were proud of their new political status, especially after 1949’.¹⁵⁵ Chiew here appropriately describes the attitude of the Straits-born Chinese who were far removed from the ideologies of the communist government. The introduction of communism in China saw the replacement of many Chinese institutions and customs with Maoist ones, and this served to alienate the diaspora as a whole from China.¹⁵⁶

The 1950s also witnessed the aftermath of World War Two, and for the Straits-born Chinese during this period, who had earlier identified with Britain and colonial values, the arrival of the Japanese served to weaken the community’s faith in the British government. The Japanese war that had taken place in 1939 brought about a shift in the political affiliation and affections of the Straits-borns. During the Japanese occupation of Malaya, large-scale political organisation occurred in the 1930s, and this

¹⁵⁵ Chiew Seen Kong, *op. cit.*, p.212.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.220.

is evident in the activities of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), an exclusively Chinese group which organised anti-Japanese strikes in the form of a guerrilla army and a civilian resistance. As Chiew describes the general attitude of the diaspora during the period, '[d]uring the Japanese Occupation, we did not identify ourselves as Japanese subjects ... When peace returned in 1945, we re-asserted our status as citizens of Singapore.'¹⁵⁷ In 1945, Japanese Occupation of the island came to an end, and the subsequent rise of local anti-colonialism served to rally and motivate the early diaspora toward the political development of Singapore, where the struggle for political independence, as Chiew writes, nurtured the formation of a Singaporean identity.¹⁵⁸ The MCP launched a vigorous political campaign against the British, and declared their aim to be the attainment of self-government for the colony. Towards this end, the MCP forged a common front with two political parties, the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) and the People's Action Party (PAP), to exert pressure on the British.

Under such circumstances, the political changes of the 1950s had a profound effect not only on the social and historical development of the country, but also on the literary and cultural history of the diaspora. In the wake of Singapore's social and political restructuring, a body of literature in English, predominantly poetry, also contributed to the rise in anti-colonial sentiments, where many of the writings that emerged during the period were harnessed to the anti-Japanese and anti-colonial ideas. The beginnings of English literary writing in Singapore, as Nalla Tan writes, began in

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p.212.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.213.

'the early and mid-fifties where a rising anticolonial nationalism was at play',¹⁵⁹ and to that extent, the emergence of a literature in English is historically and politically significant 'for it coincided with the moment when members of the English-educated class the majority of whom were Chinese, realised that they must cease to perceive themselves as separate ethnic entities.'¹⁶⁰ Thus, aligned with the political and social concerns of the time, much of the literature of the period was written by the colonised and about the effects of colonisation. The origins and creation of English literature in Singapore, were impelled by essentially anti-colonial and nationalistic concerns, and literary writing during the period functioned as a linguistic expression of national identity. The poetry of Edwin Thumboo, Goh Sin Tub, and Wang Gungwu, for instance, was amongst what Koh Tai Ann describes as 'politically conscious poems', written by a pioneer generation of writers in English, who were inspired by the belief and hope that their writing could help foster a sense of national identity and community. These pioneer writers, Leong Liew Geok suggests, were motivated by the beginnings of a Malayan consciousness, and 'strove to project a nationalist spirit in their writing.'¹⁶¹ Hence, the poem 'May 1954' by Edwin Thumboo for example, describes aptly the events of the "May 13, 1954" mass demonstration, which occurred in the wake of the colony's anti-colonial movements:

We ask you see

¹⁵⁹ Nalla Tan (ed.), *The Proceedings of a Seminar on Developing Creative Writing in Singapore*, August 6th-7th, 1976, p.2. It should be noted here that although the existence of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* during the nineteenth century was evidence of literary activity within the diaspora, the main preoccupations of the magazine were cultural and education, with only a few publication of verses and fiction. To that extent, Tan's observation here are tenable, in that a tradition of English literature in its various forms originated only in the 1950s, after the second world war, and that which were written and published by a post war generation of English educated Chinese intellectuals.

¹⁶⁰ Koh Tai Ann, 'Literature in English By Chinese In Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore: Its origins and Development', p.120.

¹⁶¹ Leong Liew Geok, *Responsibility and Commitment*, Singapore: University Press, 1997, p.10.

The bitter, curving tide of history
 See well enough, relinquish,
 Restore this place, this sun
 To us ... and the waiting generations.
 Depart white man.

Depart:
 You knew when to come;
 Surely know when to go.
 Do not ignore, Dismiss,
 Pretending we are foolish;
 Harbour contempt in eloquence.
 We know your language.

The poem's engagement with the 'bitter, curving tide of history', and the social and political issues of the day is clear. The tone is forceful and commanding, ironically insisting on the departure of the colonisers, '[d]epart white man', '[y]ou knew when to come; [s]urely know when to go.' As Thumboo himself writes on the role of the poet, 'the poet's problems and celebrations are those of his society',¹⁶² and the sentiments of his poem reflect the anti-colonial movements of the period. The struggle for self-government was a predominant theme among poems such as 'May 13, 1954', and politically conscious works such as Thumboo's emerged out of the wider social and political context of anti-colonialism. Indeed, the diaspora's shared history of British colonisation helped cement the community's allegiance to the host nation, where even as early as the 1920s, as Wang writes, 'there was a strong undercurrent of anti-colonialism and anti-Western values which led some Chinese to support local nationalist movements to drive out colonial powers from Southeast Asia.'¹⁶³

¹⁶² Edwin Thumboo (ed.), *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures*, Singapore: The ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1985, p.3.

¹⁶³ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.177.

Without a doubt, evolving political and social conditions in the host nation during the 1950s were forcing the diasporic population as a whole to re-consider what being “a nation” means and what “being Chinese” meant for them outside China. From the 1930s onwards until the 1950s, those China-born Chinese who had made a choice to remain in the settlement permanently were geared toward the nationalism that had emerged within the host community. Historical sources reveal that nationalist ideals were propagated in the settlement, and local nation-building projects helped to sustain a sense of national identity. The educational system, for instance, was oriented toward the nurturing of a ‘supra-ethnic, national identity’,¹⁶⁴ whereby students were socialised in a multicultural school environment, and textbooks were oriented toward the four official ethnic languages: Malay, English, Tamil, and Chinese. In 1957, the Singapore citizenship ordinance marked a significant milestone in admitting the majority of China-born *huaqiaos* to citizenship in Singapore.¹⁶⁵ The enactment of this ordinance was especially relevant for those China-borns who slowly gave up their Chinese nationalist identity while acquiring a local national one.¹⁶⁶ By the time the host settlement gained independence from the colonial government in 1959, and was separated from the rest of Malaya in 1965, a completely new kind of Chinese identity had emerged. The events of 1959 and 1965 thus showed how ready and willing both the Straits-borns and China-borns were in recreating a Chinese community outside their ancestral land, and securing what William Safran has described as ‘an institutionally guaranteed status for

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p.218.

¹⁶⁵ Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, p.211.

¹⁶⁶ As I have suggested in Chapter Two, many of the China-born Chinese who made a choice not to return to China had by now made their homes in Singapore and Malaya. It was also during this period that the *huaqiao* identity began to lose its dominance, giving way to two new terms *huayi* and *huaren*. The term *huayi* refers to descendants of the early diaspora, while the term *huaren* refers to persons of Chinese ethnicity. Both terms do not entail a political affiliation with China. Wang Gungwu in *China and the Chinese Overseas* offers a detailed discussion of the different usage of the two terms. See also Edgar Wickberg, ‘Chinese as Overseas Migrants’ in *Migration: The Asian Experience*, p.32.

its culture',¹⁶⁷ with more appealing political and economic conditions. As citizens of the new nation-state, most China-borns slowly gave up their Chinese nationalist identity and acquired a local, national one.¹⁶⁸ As Chiew writes:

The first generation of Chinese immigrants initially identified themselves as overseas Chinese and had strong sentimental attachments to their homeland in China. Their Singapore-born children, who grew up in Singapore, had their education in English schools or the current bilingual schools, and live in close proximity with other ethnic groups, know no other country and hence are unable to identify themselves with China, especially since 1949, when China became a poor, communist country.¹⁶⁹

Chiew sums it up succinctly in the narrative when he describes the identity of the diaspora as it has evolved across the generations. While the China-borns had strong political and cultural attachments to their ancestral land, the emergence of nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments served to effectively transform and propel their affinities toward a local form of national identity. These diasporic subjects had become so dominant in the host society that they were able to secure a hegemonic position for themselves and their culture, and in effect, recreate a Chinese community outside their natal homeland.

Under these circumstances, the issue of "Chineseness" and Chinese identity, during the 1950s and throughout the twentieth century, continues to be formulated as a question of coping with change and alterity. Subjects of the contemporary diaspora have thus to be re-evaluated in the light of a community which has founded a new state

¹⁶⁷ William Safran, *op. cit.*, p.89.

¹⁶⁸ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.209.

¹⁶⁹ Chiew Seen Kong, *op. cit.*, pp.219-220. On the subject of national identity and the Chinese Singaporean, see also Tan Chee Beng, 'People of Chinese Descent: Language, Nationality and

on land that had at one time been alien to them. Shirley Lim suggests two major ideological frameworks that were set in motion during the period from 1965 onwards.¹⁷⁰ The first is that of modernisation, which includes the transformation of traditional social orders to those more amenable to industrialisation, globalisation and high technology. This process of modernisation was, in a sense, an attempt to cope with the external pressures of economic and social changes that were taking place in the international network, and to propel the colony's route to modernity. The other is that of 'nation-building', which includes 'pursuing a pluralistic or multi-ethnic policy'.¹⁷¹ Within this 'multi-ethnic' framework, the sense of a Singapore identity that was to evolve has to include the nation's different ethnic groups. Singapore is a city-state of a predominantly, although not exclusively, Chinese population. For this reason, the notion of a national identity had to include the Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Anglo-European cultures that make up the majority of the nation's multicultural population. On the level of the nation-state discourse, the constitutional pledge of allegiance which says '[w]e the citizens of Singapore pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language and religion, ...', underpins a collective "Singaporean" identity regardless of ethnicity. On the level of the literary discourse, a tradition of English language writing mainly in the form of poetry and songs also emerged as a response to the social and political changes of the post-1950s. The community song 'One People, One Nation One Singapore', for instance, expresses vividly the symbols and rituals of a national identity that had emerged in the new nation-state:

Identity' in Wang Li-chi and Wang Gungwu (eds.), *The Chinese Diaspora. Selected Essays. Volume I*, Singapore: Times Academic Press, pp.29-47.

¹⁷⁰ Shirley Lim, *Writing S.E./Asia in English: Against the Grain*, London: Skoob Books Publishing Ltd., 1994, p.107.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

We've built a nation with our hands
 The toil of people from a dozen lands
 Strangers when we first began
 Now we're Singaporean;
 Let's reach out for Singapore
 Join our hands forever more.
 One people, one nation, one Singapore.
 That's the way we will be forever more.

The song above makes explicit the symbols of a national identity and ideology, and does so by extolling a Singaporean identity, entreating all Singaporeans to 'reach out for Singapore', and 'join ... hands forever more'. The lyrics evoke images of the nation's immigrant past, and describe the creation of a new society from a diversity of cultures and peoples from 'a dozen lands'. In a sense, the song functions as an expression of Singapore's nationalism; a nationalism which envisions the nation-state as the homeland of all who have settled there, regardless of their national origin or ethnic affiliation. It is clear that the verse expresses an appreciation of the people's attempts to come together as 'one nation', and exhorts all Singaporeans to remain as such 'forever more'. By the same token, a generation of writers who emerged during the 1950s and 60s also attempted to be a part of the nationalistic spirit. Singaporean writing, as Robbie Goh suggests, remains bound to 'a historical project of articulating national identity',¹⁷² and the poem 'My Country and My People' by Lee Tzu Pheng, for instance, testifies to a patriotic but at the same time ambiguous depiction of a local-born, English-educated writer of Singapore, who is of Chinese origin but writes in the English language:

I came in the boom of babies, not guns,
 a 'daughter of a better age';
 I held a pencil in a school

¹⁷² Robbie B.H. Goh, *Memories and Desires*, Singapore: Unipress, 1998, p.xvii.

while the 'age' was quelling riots
 in the street, or cutting down
 those foreign 'devils',
 (whose books I was being taught to read) ...

My country and my people
 I never understood.
 I grew up in China's mighty shadow,
 with my gentle, brown skinned neighbours;
 but I keep diaries in English.

I claim citizenship in your recognition
 of our kind.
 My people, and my country,
 are you, and you my home.¹⁷³

The poem above sums up literally, and metaphorically, the social changes of the post-1950s era of political unrest and 'quelling riots', and the effects of colonialism in the hands of 'those foreign 'devils''. The poem encapsulates appropriately the sentiments of a post-1950s generation of Singaporeans who have inherited an immigrant and colonial past, and who have had to live with a Western colonial heritage. Lee, as Koh suggests, 'consciously writes as a member of the postwar and post-independence baby boom generation which was still at school during the anti-colonial struggle'.¹⁷⁴ The poem recognises the paradox of a post-colonial individual who grew up in 'China's mighty shadow' but 'keeps diaries in English', and reveals too, the struggle of the individual living in a multi-cultural society with 'brown-skinned neighbours'. Thus, the first two stanzas address the problems of race, culture, and language in a newly-independent nation, and the poet brings out the dilemma of the individual in society. The poem concludes however, with a direct and firm conviction of identity and belonging, with

¹⁷³ Lee Tzu Pheng, 'My Country and My People' in Lee Tzu Pheng, *Prospect of a Drowning*, Singapore: Heiemann Educational Books, 1980, p.52.

¹⁷⁴ Koh Tai Ann, *op. cit.* p.120.

the subject of the poem claiming 'My people, and my country, are you, and you my home'.

Indeed, the patriotic and nationalistic spirit of the post-1950s was aptly captured, in both literary and constitutional form, and what emerged therefore, was a conscious desire to foster a cohesive and integrated sense of national identity. At the same time, from a sociological perspective, how the government conducted itself vis-a-vis its diasporic communities for the sake of a national identity is also reflected in its efforts to create a multicultural environment in general. The government appeared to embark on a deliberate and purposeful campaign of nation building and this is evident, for instance, in the social restructuring of the community, through the engineering of the island's public housing. A year after independence in 1960, the Housing Development Board (HDB) was established to provide affordable public housing to Singaporeans. Approximately four decades later, in March 1989, the HDB announced its policy of ethnic quotas for public housing, in an attempt to create a microcosm of Singapore's ethnic mix. The policy sets a maximum percentage of residents from each ethnic group who were permitted to live in each neighbourhood. Thus, for example, as cited in an article published in *The Straits Times* in 1989, 76 percent of each neighbourhood would be allocated to the Chinese, 15.1 percent Malays, and 8.9 percent Indians or other ethnic minorities.¹⁷⁵ Consequently, the remits of such a policy would also apply to any transaction taking place with the purchase and sale of flats within the HDB, where, for example, a Chinese family could sell their flat to another Chinese, but not to a Malay or Indian family. In view of such a policy, the rationale

¹⁷⁵ *The Straits Times*, February 1989, cited in Lai Ah Sng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1995, p.121.

behind it is clear, and is consistent with the government's intention, which was to maintain an 'ethnic balance' within the community as a whole, and as far as possible, to 'demographically conform to and represent the multiracial complex as a sign of ethnic integration.'¹⁷⁶ In a sense, such a re-grouping of ethnic communities could be perceived as a direct contrast to the pre-1950s colonial period, in which the island's ethnic groups lived in their own districts and the re-structuring of the settlement was dependent on class and economics, as initiated by the colonial government.

Yet, this emphasis on ethnic integration and national identity does not suggest, in any way, an obliteration of racial or cultural identity. The ideals of nationhood precipitated the emergence of what Edgar Wickberg perceives as the 'hyphenated Chinese', 'Chinese-Americans, Chinese Filipinos and so on.'¹⁷⁷ These are expressions, which, according to Wickberg, espouse the integration of the Chinese as an ethnic group, rather than their assimilation into a "melting-pot" culture. As such, alongside the Singapore government's pledge to a "multiracial" and "multilingual" policy, there was also a strong wish to maintain a Chinese cultural identity. During the late 1960s, a bilingual policy was introduced and emphasised to enable the Chinese and indeed, the various ethnic groups, to retain their native language. Mandarin, for instance, was expected to function as a means of reclaiming and preserving the Chinese tradition and culture. In 1966, bilingualism was made compulsory in schools, where students of Chinese origins were socialised and taught the English language, as well as Mandarin, their mother tongue. In 1979, the Singapore government launched the annual "Speak Mandarin Campaign", with slogans such as 'Make Mandarin a Way of Life' and

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p.122.

‘Mandarin is Chinese’.¹⁷⁸ The rationale behind this drive was that ‘Mandarin’ would serve as a communal language between the different dialect groups, as well as facilitate the transmission of Chinese values. In 1987, a survey published in *The Straits Times* revealed that 87 percent of Chinese could speak Mandarin, eight years after the Speak Mandarin Campaign began, and in Chinese households, the use of Mandarin as the predominant language rose from 13 percent in 1980 to 30 percent in 1990.¹⁷⁹ Thus, it became apparent that by the late twentieth century, being and becoming Chinese had gained momentum, and the sense of national identity that emerged during the late twentieth century was simultaneously accompanied by a promotion of a Chinese cultural identity.

In a sense, the espousal of a ‘Chinese-Singaporean’ identity in the post-1950s diaspora showed the extent to which the early diasporic community had evolved. The ability of the China-born Chinese and Straits-born Chinese to alter their sense of identity and belonging from a sojourner immigrant to a ‘Chinese-Singaporean’ is the most interesting aspect of the diasporic experience in Singapore, and it shows that they were capable of adapting to the new forces of nationalism. Wang has observed that ‘Singapore’s remarkable success has truly turned immigrants into settlers and has ensured that those of Chinese descent among its citizens have a home to live and die

¹⁷⁷ Edgar Wickberg, ‘Chinese as Overseas Migrants’ in Judith M. Brown and Rosemary Foot (ed.), p.31.

¹⁷⁸ In the 1980s, the “Speak Mandarin” campaign was emphasised and accompanied by the promotion of Confucianism. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew argued that ‘[t]he greatest value in the teaching and learning of Chinese is in the transmission of the norms of social or moral behaviour. This means principally Confucianist beliefs and ideas, of man, society and the state.’ Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, p.216. The promotion of ‘Mandarin’ as synonymous with Confucianism, is therefore seen as a means of safeguarding against the loss of Chinese traditional values, Chinese culture, and identity.

¹⁷⁹ *The Straits Times*, October 1989, cited in Lai Ah Sng, *op. cit.*, p.147.

for',¹⁸⁰ thus implying that the notion of "home" has shifted. The China-borns have demonstrated that they do not always want to be conceived as a supplementary concern, but as a constitutive part in the construction of a united nation-people within the host settlement. They afford a good example of how the beginnings of diasporas can also lead to new political identities, where a common history of colonial and post-colonial solidarity contributes to a powerful force in a nationalist agenda.

The experience of the early diaspora in Singapore also serves to challenge the stereotype of the displaced and marginalised position of diasporas, as theorised by Safran. According to him, diasporas are characterised by their status as expatriate minorities in their dispersal from an original "centre" to two or more "peripheral" foreign regions, and in their alienation and insulation from the host nation.¹⁸¹ Words and phrases used in his definition, such as 'minority communities', 'peripheral', 'foreign', 'insulated', and 'alienated', are imbued with negative connotations and reinforce the diaspora's adverse experience. Such a definition produces a view of diasporas as communities of individuals who are always situated in peripheral areas, in territorial borders, and who are displaced and alienated in their new world of residence. Conner has also stressed a similar notion of diasporic groups when he says that '[m]embers of a diaspora can never be at home in a homeland. They are at best sojourners, remaining at the sufferance of the indigenous people.'¹⁸² Both Safran and Conner reinforce the marginalisation and alienation of such peoples. This is because their conception of diaspora emphasises only the negative effects of the experience,

¹⁸⁰ Wang Gungwu, *op. cit.*, p.178.

¹⁸¹ William Safran, *op. cit.*, pp.83-84.

¹⁸² Walker Conner, *op. cit.*, p.20.

and pays insufficient attention to the possibility of positive relations, as exemplified in the Chinese situation.

Safran's and Conner's definitions simplify the complexities of the diasporic subject formation by construing it strictly in terms of alienation and displacement. The realities of the Chinese diaspora have shown that conceptions of the community's belonging and identity are far more diverse than the negative definitions suggested by these theorists. As Cohen has written, '[t]here must be more recognition of the positive virtues of retaining a diasporic identity than is implied in Safran's list'.¹⁸³ In the early diaspora, where the local Chinese community makes up more than half the population, it is not surprising that the China-born migrants were on the whole willing to abandon their Chinese nationalist identity in order to build on a communal identity. Therefore, when discussing issues of identity and belonging, marginality should not be thought of as the normative model of diasporas. The alienation and displacement experienced by a diasporic group is relative to its specific historical experience. It is not always the case that the diasporic subject is situated at the periphery of the host society, and driven solely by the cause, imagined or otherwise, of returning to his or her homeland. By the 1950s, the homeland myth which had at one time characterised the behaviour and attitude of the China-born Chinese was displaced by a community striving for political and cultural autonomy. To that extent, the problem of the relationship between the diaspora and its homeland, and indeed, the very definition of diaspora itself, goes beyond the purely ethnic and cultural. The question of whether the Chinese in Singapore can continue to be defined as a 'diaspora' in the post-1950s, also remains debatable, not only because members of the community have settled in the

country, but because they have defined their membership as citizens of the nation-state. Yet, on the other hand, there are also grounds to suggest that in a cultural-historical sense, the diaspora has not ended, because the state of Singapore is itself in a “diasporic” condition, in the way that its members of Chinese origin continue to preserve a Chinese cultural heritage and maintain their ethnoracial distinctiveness; where the “homeland myth” is translated into a support of “Chineseness” in cultural and linguistic terms. Nevertheless, what remains clear is that the diaspora in Singapore, especially during the pre-1950s, cannot be defined within an exclusivist paradigm as proposed by Safran and Conner, and the notion of a Chinese identity in general cannot be circumscribed according to an inventory of essential features or qualities that characterise diasporas on a global basis. The Chinese people present a different form of diaspora-type community that challenges the displaced and marginalised notion of diasporic groups, and as a diasporic group that constitutes the ruling majority, the Chinese have maintained a predominant presence within the host society. As Lai asserts, Singapore is unique in Southeast Asia in ‘its ability to hold a multiethnic but predominantly Chinese population together’.¹⁸⁴ The fact that politically, by the late twentieth century, the Chinese in Singapore are in a hegemonic position means that the theory of diasporic marginalisation that Safran and Conner suggest does not apply. Hegemony, in this case, works to situate the diaspora in a productive and positive relationship with the nation-state, whereby the notion of a Chinese identity is as much tied to a nationalistic identification within the host settlement as it is conceived, as Lee Tzu Pheng so aptly describes, in ‘China’s mighty shadow’.

¹⁸³ Robin Cohen, *op. cit.*, p.24.

¹⁸⁴ Lay Ah Sng, *op. cit.*, p.178.

Chapter 3

The Straits Chinese Magazine and Subjects of the Chinese Diaspora 1897-1907.

Chapter Two argued that the Straits-born Chinese and their perceptions of identity are distinct in the sense that they have been assimilated into the local Malay and colonial culture, and as such, do not emphasise the same cultural features as the rest of the diaspora. The solidarity of the Straits-borns is based on a common language, *Baba Malay*, and a shared perception of an ethnic bond based on hybridity. Unlike the China-born Chinese, members of this group are not only physically but also politically detached from China. Instead, they perceive themselves as settlers in the colony, and are perceived as such by others. They are, in short, an enclave living within their own community, enjoying linguistic and cultural autonomy in the host society. If we consider their situation, the question that immediately comes to mind, and one that has to be addressed, is whether the Straits Chinese can at all be described as a “diaspora”.

Indeed, if “diaspora” is defined in its traditional sense as a group of ethnic minorities who, by force of circumstance, live away from their historic homeland and are characterised by their desire to return to that homeland, in much the same way that “diaspora” is applied to the Jewish situation, then the Straits-borns who arrived in Singapore after the 1819 cannot be described as a diaspora. They are a people of Chinese descent who were born and bred in the Straits Settlements. They came to settle and work in the colony, intermarried and assimilated into the local Malay community, no longer speak Chinese, and are not much concerned with the political affairs of their ancestral homeland.

However, if the notion of “diaspora” is extended to broadly refer to that segment of people who ‘have themselves or their ancestors been dispersed from a specific original “centre” to two or more foreign regions’, and who believe that they should be ‘committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland’¹ - in the way that Safran and Conner have conceptualised the term, then the Straits-borns may be considered as constituting a diaspora. As the rest of this chapter will show, members of this community do not have a desire to “go home” because they do not identify politically with China and therefore have no homeland to which to return. Yet, they continue to identify themselves culturally as “Chinese”, and share the moral burden of restoring and maintaining some form of “lost” or endangered ancestral culture. As Safran suggests in his conceptualisation of ‘diaspora’, diasporic subjects are ‘committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland’, and to an eventual return to that homeland. In the case of the Straits-born Chinese, their undertaking to restore and maintain the natal land does not in any way entail a geographical re-location to the homeland. However, what it does entail, as the discussion that follows demonstrates, is a notion of the ‘maintenance’ and ‘restoration’ of the homeland that is connected to a re-creation of the cultural practices of the natal land in the host nation, which implies, therefore, a metaphorical, rather than a literal “return” to the homeland.

Using the conceptual groundwork discussed above and those foregrounded in Chapter Two, the constitution of the Straits-born Chinese in the diaspora will thus be explored in this chapter, with specific reference to an early literary journal: *The Straits*

Chinese Magazine. The narratives in the magazine represent the writings of the Straits-born Chinese during the nineteenth century, and afford evidence that English language writing by the Chinese existed in Singapore as early as the nineteenth century. The works of the Straits-born writers are evidence that the diaspora did not constitute a homogeneous group of immigrant, indentured workers. On the contrary, they reveal the existence of a scholarly class who were capable of literary production. What emerges from the magazine's pages, I argue, is a diasporic community negotiating and articulating an identity for itself within its own communal enclave, striving for cultural autonomy within the diaspora.² What this chapter aims to do then, is to provide at the outset, a context to the magazine, looking in particular at its role, purpose, and readership, and the ways in which the journal can be perceived as a means of understanding how the Straits-born Chinese, as a diasporic group, maintained their identity vis-a-vis the rest of the population in the host society: the China-borns, the Malays, and the Europeans.

This chapter also aims to locate *The Straits Chinese Magazine* within a historical and cultural context, where the writings in the magazine reflect the interests, concerns, and literary tastes of members of the community. The essays on cultural and educational reforms reveal the Straits Chinese's profound interest in a similar reform movement that was taking place in China during the late nineteenth century, while the essays of a scientific nature for example, reflect an awareness on the part of the Straits-born Chinese of the anthropological and ethnographic trends that were taking off in

¹ William Safran, *op. cit.*, p.83.

² With reference to the Straits-born Chinese, I use the terms 'diaspora' and 'diasporic' here in the way that Safran has defined it, as that group of people who have 'themselves or their ancestors been dispersed from a specific original "centre". In this context, I argue that the Straits-born Chinese can,

Europe at the time. The following discussion will explore the predicament of a diasporic people operating under colonialism, and who are in the process of negotiating a space for themselves in both the Chinese and Anglo-Chinese cultures. The subtitle of the magazine - '*A Quarterly Journal of Oriental and Occidental Culture*' that is printed at the front page of each volume, is symbolic of the cross-cultural form of identity that pervades the discourse of the magazine. As the subtitle suggests, the aim of its editors is to promote the magazine as an interplay of two contrasting cultural discourses: the Oriental and Occidental cultures, and this reveals the extent to which the journal is operating within a Western colonial discourse. *The Straits Chinese Magazine* reflects the desire of the English-educated Straits-borns to mediate between the Chinese 'oriental' culture of their upbringing, and the Western 'occidental' culture of their English education. The writings in the journal represent the interests of this elite group of diasporic individuals who are concerned with the regeneration of ancestral cultural practices, but who are at the same time, concerned with the translation and reformation of these practices into non-ancestral forms, in order that new socio-cultural growths can flourish.

***The Straits Chinese Magazine* in Context: Its Role, Readership, Funding, and Function as a Discourse of Interaction between Disparate Ethnic Communities.**

The Straits Chinese Magazine was the first English language journal to be published in the diaspora. As its title suggests, the Straits-born Chinese played a crucial role in its writing and publication, where readership of the journal was aimed primarily at members of the community. The magazine was part of a growing literary culture

and continue to be described as a diasporic group, despite the fact that they exhibit signs of striving

that had emerged amongst the diasporic Chinese during the late nineteenth century, and was in circulation alongside supplements such the *Lat Pau* (1872-1890) and *Thien Nan Shin Pao* (1898-1905), two contemporary Chinese language newspapers. First issued during the period of British colonial rule in 1897, the journal was published quarterly, at the end of March, June, September, and December. It was sold at 50 cents per copy and cost \$1.50 per annum.³ It is a magazine, as the editors write, that was sustained by the literary and financial contributions of the Straits-born Chinese, who were ‘literary men, of whom there [were] not a few’.⁴ The advertisements published in the final pages of each issue reveal the sources of funding for the magazine, which was derived from a variety of private businesses, such as the local agent for general groceries ‘Yap Whatt & Co.’ and the ‘Singapore Foundry, Ltd.’, a local civil engineering company.⁵ While it would appear that *The Straits Chinese Magazine* was well supported by advertisements from these leading companies, it was not known whether these businesses were owned by members of the Straits-born Chinese community or otherwise. Nevertheless, what is apparent is that the advertisers were from the local mercantile community, and their financial contributions helped, as the editors write, towards ‘making [the] journal to be what it has always tried to be – a magazine for the Straits people.’⁶

In addition, what is also clear is that the stated purpose of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* was to ‘reach all classes’ and to address ‘Straits people generally’.⁷ This is delineated in the editorial page of its very first issue, where the magazine’s editors

for cultural autonomy and has, to some extent, achieved it.

³ ‘Notice’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.1 No.1, March 1897, p.33.

⁴ *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.2 No.7, December 1898, p.122.

⁵ See Appendix 3. *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.11 No.1, March 1907.

⁶ *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.2 No.7, December 1898, *op. cit.*

single out the ‘Straits-born people of all nationalities’⁸ as their intended audience. The phrase ‘all nationalities’ here is used to refer to Straits people in general who were of different ethnic backgrounds and national origins.⁹ As the editors reveal later in the magazine, the journal was to be made accessible to the ‘varied races ... of whatever creed and nationality’ who resided in the colony, thus calling into existence a kind of “imagined community” for the Straits-born Chinese.¹⁰ At the same time, as a journal catering for the Straits people in general, it was also possible that *The Straits Chinese Magazine* was circulated throughout the Straits Settlements in the different Malayan colonies. There were, for instance, letters from Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang that were addressed to the editors, and reproduced in the magazine. The news items or contents of these letters were of a varied kind, and they ranged from personal news to social bulletins, from the domestic to the foreign. For example, a letter from Penang published in March 1907, contained news reports of various social events: ‘more fires have occurred in various parts of the town during the last six months’, ‘more names of bankrupts have been added to the already swollen list’, and ‘[t]his Chinese New Year passed off more quietly than last year’.¹¹ In addition, some of the letters to the editors were of a personal nature, announcing to readers, for instance, the demise of the wife of Mr. Lim Kek Chuan, the managing partner of the Opium Farm who ‘died at the beginning of the month’ in March 1907.¹² The letters would also often consist of a few lines of gossip, where a letter from Malacca for example, states that ‘[a]lthough Mr. Ong Kim Wee’s mother died some weeks ago, the coffin is still kept in the house and

⁷ The Editors, ‘Our Programme’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 1, March 1897, p. 1.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.2.

¹¹ ‘Our Penang Letter’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.11 No.1, March 1907, pp.31-32.

¹² *ibid.*, p.32.

nightly a bevy of Buddhist priests may be seen repeating their chant.’¹³ There were on the contrary, other more serious reports of local social events, such as ‘[t]he Municipality is negotiating through the Land Office for the acquisition of certain houses and a strip of land occupied by the old Fish Market ...’.¹⁴ Finally, notices of transfer, changes of partnership, and news of business transactions were also a common feature in the magazine, and these were incorporated within the correspondences. In general, the news items and selection of letters reproduced within the magazine were of a varied nature, depending to a large extent, on the interests of the writers and the events that took place during the time. These correspondences were published anonymously, and it is difficult to find out how and from whom the magazine obtained its news, although it is probable that the correspondents were friends, journalists, or agents who were living in other parts of Malaya, and whose news the editors clearly felt would be of interest to their own readers in Singapore. What does seem clear, is that the correspondences reveal a degree of communication that was taking place amongst the Straits people of Singapore, and with their counterparts in the British settlements of Malaya.

Within such a context, the writings in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* thus tell us something about the community and the diasporic writers behind the texts. They reveal a high level of awareness amongst the Straits-people in Singapore regarding the affairs of their neighbouring colonies, as well as a general interest of the Straits-born community towards any information beyond the routine of their normal daily lives. At the same time, what the magazine also reveals is a tradition of multiculturalism and

¹³ ‘Our Malacca Letter’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.11 No.1, March 1907, p.33.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

cultural interaction that existed during the period of the early diaspora, and which was reproduced within the discourse of the texts. As T.N. Harper reminds us, '[h]istorians have written about how specific diasporas came to terms with their new environment, but have said little about how specific diasporas conversed with each other',¹⁵ and to that extent, the writings in the early journal exemplify how, and in what ways, the different ethnic groups in the settlement were situated in relation to one another during the nineteenth century. This would include the various diasporic groups such as the Malays, the Straits Chinese, the China-borns, and the Europeans that inhabited the settlement of Singapore during the nineteenth century. In accordance with the stated purpose of *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, the texts published in the journal are thus representative of the ethnic peoples that were part of the early diaspora. As its editors write, the magazine provides a 'discussion of useful, interesting and curious matters connected with the customs, social life, folk-lore, history and religion of the varied races who have made their home in this colony.'¹⁶ Moreover, the works written and collected within the journal are indicative of an attempt on the part of the magazine's editors and writers to give prominence to writings of a varied kind. The 'table of contents' in the first issue gives an insight into the texts and themes admitted into the magazine.¹⁷ The writings that were published comprised both fiction and non-fiction, and were also represented in a variety of forms - poetry, short stories, correspondence, announcements, and historical accounts. Furthermore, the texts in the magazine dealt with a variety of themes including science, current events, education, geography, history, and politics; although the main preoccupations of the journal were cultural and

¹⁵ T.N. Harper, 'Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity: The Making of Diasporic Public Sphere in Singapore' in *Sojourn* 12(2), October 1997, p.262.

¹⁶ The Editors, 'Our Programme' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 1, March 1897, p. 1.

¹⁷ See Appendix 4.

educational, and of a non-fictional nature, with only a few scattered works of verses and short fiction.

At the same time, the writings in the magazine also reveal the work of local scholars from diverse parts of colonial Singapore, who represent a variety of cultural backgrounds and perspectives. For the most part, the journal was written in the English language, although there were also, for instance, a number of publications in the Chinese language and *Baba Malay*. What is striking, however, is the apparent absence of works in the Tamil language and limited references to the Indian culture and community. On the rare occasion when the magazine does allude to members of this ethnic group, it does insofar as to comment, in a brief news report, events that were happening in India during the time. Thus, for instance, in the March issue of 1897, the editors note, in a short bulletin, the occurrence of a famine in India, and that 'donations to a Relief Fund to the amount of \$20 have been received' by the Straits-born Chinese.¹⁸ It is probable that the limited reference to the Indian people is due to a lack of readership amongst members of the Indian community. Compared to the rest of the population, Indians constituted a relatively small ethnic minority, most of whom chose to return to India after a period of sojourn.¹⁹ Demography may therefore account for the lack of literary contributions by individuals of the community themselves.

Thus, for the most part, the writings in the journal were based predominantly on the early Chinese diaspora, and at other times, the Malay and European population. This is reflected in the publications of English and Chinese works, and in the few

¹⁸ 'The Indian Famine' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.1 No.1 March 1897, p.32.

¹⁹ C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867*, p.46.

writings on the Malay culture and translated in *Baba Malay*. An essay entitled ‘*Cherita bagaimana orang tau makan babi panggang pertama kali*’ (1907) for instance, was published entirely in *Baba Malay*,²⁰ and most likely written with the Malay and Straits-born community in mind, who were familiar with the indigenous Malay language. In a similar vein, the June issue of 1897 also carries an article pertaining to the Malay community entitled ‘The Poetry of Malays’. Written by R.J. Wilkinson, the essay was originally delivered as a lecture to the Straits Philosophical Society in 1896. As its title suggests, the essay offers a discussion of Malay literature and literary traditions, and the article begins by foregrounding various well-known poems and short stories that were made available to the Malay-speaking community. A series of poems entitled ‘Shair Bidsari’ for example, was presumably one of the more popular works during the time and as the writer suggests, the poem is ‘known to date back more than a century’. The poems were distributed and shipped to the nearby Malayan and Indonesian islands of ‘Java, Palembang, Djambi, Bencoolen, and Trigganu, and ... [were] all at a premium a few months after they are placed on the market.’²¹ The essay goes on to discuss the merits of other notable Malay writings such as the *Ken Tambuhan* and the *Hikayat Panji Samerang*, giving the public a brief preview of each work. The writer then concludes by commending the publication and production of these literary works, asserting that one of the most remarkable features of Malay literary writing is ‘the revival of the popularity of poetry.’²² As an exposition on Malay literature, what the essay provides therefore, is an insight into the reading habits and literary tastes of the

²⁰ Song Ong Joo, ‘*Cherita bagaimana orang tau makan babi panggang pertama kali*’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.11 No.4 Dec.1907, pp.158-160.

²¹ R.J. Wilkinson, ‘The Poetry of the Malays’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.2 No.2 June 1897, p.39.

²² *ibid.*

Malay people, and of the Malay-speaking public in general, who comprised both the Malays and the Straits-born Chinese.

At the same time, the publication of various articles in *Baba Malay* also reflects the heterogeneous identity of the Straits-born Chinese, exemplified, as Clammer suggests, by their ‘closeness to the Malays in language and certain aspects of culture.’²³ This is evident through the translations of Chinese and English works into *Baba Malay*. One example is the Malay song published in the first issue of the magazine, entitled ‘Annie Laurie’.²⁴ What is interesting here is that although the lyrics of the song are composed in Malay, the song itself is to be sung to the tune of an English ballad ‘Annie Laurie’:

Annie Laurie
(In Malay)
Tune “Annie Laurie”

*Taman aku birahi,
Yang ber-embun pagi,
Disitu Annie Laurie
Padaku berjani
Padaku berjani!
Padaku berjani!
Bagei siti
Rela-lah ku mati.*

The ballad ‘Annie Laurie’, as seen above, is clearly bilingual in form, employing the use of two different registers: Malay and English. The phrase ‘*Disitu*’ for instance, in the third line, is followed by the words ‘Annie Laurie’. Part Malay and part English, the song can be said to encapsulate the identity of the Straits-born Chinese, which is itself a cultural synthesis of the Anglo-Chinese and Malay cultures. As Clammer writes, it is this very synthesis that represents the ‘cultural ambivalence’ of the community,

²³ John R. Clammer, *op. cit.*, p.69.

²⁴ C.P. ‘Annie Laurie’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 1, March 1897, p.15.

containing as it does in the ‘heterogeneous contents of the famous *Straits Chinese Magazine*.’²⁵

Elsewhere in the magazine, there are also literary works submitted by Europeans residing in the colony, written and published in the English language. These writings revolve around domestic themes such as romance, friendship and family life, and include for instance, Bertie Armstrong’s ‘Twixt Duty and Disgrace’,²⁶ ‘A Malayan Episode’ by Mrs. W. Evans, and Kelwin Baxter’s ‘Nellie’s Triumph’.²⁷ These writings demarcate a colonial space within the discourse of *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, and exemplify the kind of fictional narratives produced by Europeans residing in the community during the period. They constitute a minority of the magazine’s overall literary works and, as Holden suggests, ‘are the kind of stories that might have been published in any literary magazine in England.’²⁸ Also included in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* are a large number of classical Chinese poems that have been translated into the English language, and which draw on the history of China during the period of the various Chinese dynasties. The poet and writer Tan Tek Soon, for instance, contributed a series of articles entitled ‘Some Genuine Chinese Authors’, which brought to centre-stage various literary works by writers from China. In the articles, he attempts to introduce Chinese poems, and the different literary and artistic styles of Chinese classical texts. The choice of Tan’s poems are deliberate in that his selection of Chinese works represent what he perceives as ‘the most important books in their

²⁵ John R. Clammer, *op. cit.*, p.70.

²⁶ Bertie Armstrong, ‘Twixt Duty and Disgrace’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.1 No.1, March 1897, pp.24-25.

²⁷ Kelwin Baxter, ‘Nellie’s Triumph’, in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.2 No.2, June 1897, pp.175-181.

²⁸ Philip Holden, ‘Colonial Fiction, Hybrid Lives’ p.88.

literature’, and ‘the most important achievement of the Han scholars’.²⁹ In accordance with the stated purpose of the journal which was to discuss ‘all matters’ that would possibly be of interest to ‘Straits people generally’,³⁰ Tan’s essay and his review of the Chinese poem were included in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*. The following brief analysis of the poem also demonstrates that its publication in the magazine served another purpose, which was to instruct readers in Chinese history and literature. For example, in one of his papers in the series, Tan provides a chronological review of Chinese classical poems, ranging from the Han period to the Sung period.³¹ One of these is by Tsao Tzu Kien:

du dou re dou ji
dou shai ji zhong yi
bu xing tong re sen
xiang qian he tai ji

The stalk was burnt to cook the bean
 The bean in grief did utter
 Our root the same, wherefore so keen
 The one to cook the other³²

Tan’s essay can be said to perform the didactic function of educating the magazine’s *intended audience*, the Straits-born people, about Chinese literary traditions. He provides not only a translation of the verse, but also an interpretation of its literary history, and, according to him, the poem won its poet, Tzu Kien, the title of “*qi bu cheng ju*”, or the seven-paced rhymster. In the essay, Tan goes on to give an account of the historical context surrounding the poem, whereby the elder brother of Tzu Kien

²⁹ Tan Tek Soon, ‘Some Genuine Chinese Authors’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No.3, Sept. 1897, p.95.

³⁰ The Editors, *op. cit.*, p.1.

³¹ Tan Tek Soon, ‘Some Genuine Chinese Authors’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No.4, Dec. 1897, p.136.

³² *ibid.*, p.137.

was a well-known statesman and warrior who ousted the Hans and succeeded the throne from their father, the famous warrior Tsao ts'ao. The poem is an allegory of the relationship between the two brothers. Tzu Kien's elder brother was jealous of his talent as a poet, and in a bid to undermine his poetic skills, commanded him to compose an ode in the time he would take to walk seven paces. Complying with his order, Tzu Kien took seven steps and composed the poem above. Tzu Kien's reaction to his brother's command and jealousy is conveyed in the verse. He describes their relationship in terms of organic metaphors: 'stalk', 'bean' and 'root'. 'The bean in grief did utter' suggests his sadness and presumably disappointment in being the object of his brother's jealousy. He uses the phrase 'our root the same' to remind his brother of the fact that they are of the same parentage, and then concludes the verse by questioning the reasons behind his brother's jealousy, 'wherefore so keen the one to cook the other'. Within that context, it is also probable that Tan's choice of poem is deliberate in that it refers to the intra-ethnic conflict between the Straits-born Chinese and the China-born Chinese, who were of the same ancestry but remain separate in their distinct social and cultural status. The tensions and disparity between the two groups can perhaps be exemplified by the more personal rivalry between Tzu Kien and *his brother*. This is made more apparent later on in the essay, when Tan goes on to write about the China-born coolie or the 'Chinaman in the Straits',³³ comparing their lack of literary interests to the intellectual pursuits of the more educated Straits-born Chinese, thereby reinforcing the social and cultural tensions between the two.

Besides Tzu Kien, in the same essay, Tan also alludes to other famous poets in Chinese history, such as the Tang poets: Chen Show, Tu Fu, Wang Wei, Wen Kung;

³³ Tan Tek Soon, 'Some Genuine Chinese Authors', p.137.

and the Sung poets: Fu zhu, Qing zhao and Shushen. He contrasts the poems written by these various poets, the changes and continuity in the political history of the Chinese dynasties, and examines how these changes found expressions in the poems that were produced during the time. For example, he writes about the poetry that emerged during the period of the Three Kingdoms, most of which were records of 'deed and exploits of statesmen and warriors of this heroic age.'³⁴ He then goes on to examine the contrast between the war poems and those of the Tang dynasty, which all allude in way or another to 'the detailed pictures of Nature often of great beauty.'³⁵ It would appear from Tan's various essays on famous Chinese poets that poetry anthologies have been most popular with him, but other genres, such as collections of correspondences and Chinese philosophical writings, also found their way into his essays.

Tan's essay on poetry discussed above and others in the series reveal that he recognises the literary potential of the Chinese classics written during the dynasties. The significance of his articles lies in what they can teach the diaspora about Chinese *classical texts and Chinese literary traditions*. As the theorist Rey Chow says of most colonised subjects:

Even when they were occupied, most East Asian countries retained primary use of their own languages, which continue to serve the purposes of writing and historiography and thus of preserving their cultural traditions in forms that are not easily supplanted by the West.³⁶

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Rey Chow, 'Between Colonisers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s', p.152.

In view of Chow's remarks above, that most countries in East Asia retain the primary use of their native language, it could be said that Tan's writings on Chinese authors are evidence of an attempt on his part, as a colonised diasporic subject, to maintain and safeguard the use of his Chinese ancestral language. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the essay on Tzu Kien, where he reproduces the poem of the seven-paced rhymster in its original form, and in the Chinese language. In fact, Tan's critical commentaries on Chinese poems and poets seem to be concerned with the maintenance of traditional cultural forms, and of preserving cultural traditions, and these, as Chow suggests, 'are not easily supplanted by the West.' Moreover, his conviction of the need to maintain cultural traditions is also evident at the beginning of one of his essays where he praises the work of translators whom, he claims, 'deserve the highest commendation for their enterprise in thus imparting the glimpses of their country's past history to a section otherwise completely shut out by their own ignorance.'³⁷ By the phrase 'a section', Tan is clearly alluding to the Straits-born Chinese, and his remarks speak highly of the translators' efforts to impart 'their country's past history' to members of this diasporic group. In line with the work of the translators, Tan's writings thus reflect attempts to keep alive and maintain the traditions of the ancestral culture, and his essays on Chinese literature can be seen as a celebration of the classics. It is also perhaps that his overt valorisation of Chinese classical works stems from the fact that he was himself a scholar who was engaged in studies of China. As the editors note at the end of the essay, Tan was 'well-known as one of the best Anglo-Chinese scholars among the Straits-born Chinese'³⁸ during the period of the early diaspora. Thus, Tan's Straits-born origins could perhaps explain his writings entitled 'Some Genuine Chinese

³⁷ Tan Tek Soon, 'Some Genuine Chinese Authors' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.1 No. 2, June 1897, p.63.

Authors', which attempt to look to Chinese literary traditions on one hand, and the translation of these traditions to the English language on the other.

Indeed, by translating the Chinese poems into the English language, Tan manages to bring the literature of the classical Chinese texts closer to the cultural context of a particular section of the magazine's intended readers - the Straits-born Chinese. In other words, his essay gives the Straits-born community access to their own culture, which they may have been denied because of language barriers. He affirms this through his writings, stating that traditional Chinese literature has been 'translated and made accessible to the Baba community.'³⁹ Thus, as a subject of the diaspora, Tan clearly takes upon himself the moral burden of re-constituting and restoring older cultural forms. In another essay, he reinforces his intentions of translating Chinese literary works into English:

For the benefit of those readers of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* who desire to have "restored to them the knowledge of their forefathers in English dress", I shall endeavour in the following few extracts collected from various sources of some of the best products of the Chinese mind, accompanied by translations into English by some of *the most competent scholars*. Such extracts, I hope, will not only gratify the ordinary curiosity of their readers but will also conduce to better appreciation of the motives, thought, and high ideals of some of the most representative characters in Chinese history.⁴⁰

It is clear from Tan's comments that his essays are intended to encourage the appreciation of 'the motives, thought, and high ideal of some of the most representative characters in Chinese history'. As such, his assertions here needs to be

³⁸ Tan Tek Soon, 'Some Genuine Chinese Authors', Dec. 1897, p.141.

³⁹ Tan Tek Soon, 'Some Genuine Chinese Authors', June 1897, p.63.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.64.

read alongside the educational reforms that were happening in Britain during the time, specifically the essays on education and culture which made up a large part of the work of nineteenth century British thinkers such as Matthew Arnold, J.H. Newman, and Edmund Burke. Arnold (1822-1888) for instance, sought to address the social and moral problems of his age, by suggesting 'culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which most concern us.'⁴¹ The implication behind Arnold's assertions here is that 'culture', as he defines it, is quite explicitly the alternative to social and spiritual anarchy, which entails not merely the development of a 'literary culture', but 'of all sides of our humanity', and is therefore the means to the progress of the individual and of civilisation in general. The influence of Arnold's thoughts is strongly perceptible in Tan's writing. It would appear that Tan was, in part, following the ideas and language of his British contemporary when he speaks, characteristically, of the 'better appreciation' of the thoughts and ideals of culture, and encourages the pursuit of 'some of the best products of the Chinese mind'. Historically considered, it would seem that Tan adheres to the tradition of Arnold and other literary and cultural critics of the time on the 'condition of civilisation', and manifests an almost religious seriousness in the need to enhance and reform modern society. At the same time, within the context of the early diaspora, what is also interesting in Tan's writing is that his use of the phrase 'their forefathers' suggests a distance between himself, as the writer, and his intended readers, revealing an admission on Tan's part that his audience is Chinese - and presumably Straits-born. Ironically, this admission contradicts the stated purpose of the magazine, which was to address people of all creeds and nationalities who reside in the Straits. This contradiction, as we shall soon see,

⁴¹ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, London: Smith, Elder, 1869, p.viii.

pervades the discourse of the magazine, and is an indication of the divided and conflictual subject-position of the Straits-born Chinese. However, despite this, what is apparent is that through his essays on Chinese literature, Tan plays a role in propagating Chinese classical texts to the Straits-born community. His desire to uphold and celebrate Chinese literature is reinforced by the editor, Lim, who exhorts members of the community to learn the literature and teachings of their ancestral culture. He writes:

Our forefathers were not all of them learned men, in fact, most of them were probably illiterate. But they came from a land of culture, imbued with an unbounded confidence, in the excellence of Chinese literature ... they entertained for it a patriotic passion that led them to provide for their children instruction in the classics of the middle kingdom. That the Chinese *Babas* have been able to maintain their integrity as a people is largely due to this wise and laudable policy of the early Chinese colonists. Otherwise it would not be difficult to imagine what would have happened to them if they had lost their connection with their Chinese proper and had developed - monstrous jargon of their own, devoid alike of literature and of elegance.⁴²

In this extract, Lim attributes the success of the Straits-borns to the ‘patriotic passion’ their ancestors had for imparting the Chinese culture to their children. He also reveals his concern for the community should they lose their connection with their ancestral language and culture, or to use his phrase, ‘Chinese proper’. As such, he strongly supports their exposure to Chinese literature to ensure that the future generation of this community would grow up to be educated, as he says, in ‘the classics of the middle kingdom’, and be proud of their culture. It is clear that Lim and Tan share common ground in their determination to preserve the Straits-borns’ Chinese identity by learning from their ancestors the Chinese language and literary traditions.

⁴² Lim Boon Keng, ‘Our Enemies’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 2, June 1897, p.54.

The Straits Chinese Magazine: Its Publications, Literary Impetus, Editors, and “Intended” Readers.

The previous section has demonstrated that the purpose of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* was to ‘reach all classes’ and to address the ‘Straits-born people of all nationalities’. This is manifest in the various texts in the magazine which encapsulate the ways in which different ethnic groups within the colony relate to one another. The discussion of Malay, English, and Chinese poetry published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, for example, highlights the disparate and varied constitution of the settlement of Singapore during the early diaspora, and the poems remind us that the identities that form the colony are heterogeneous, multiracial, and multicultural. Yet, in spite of this, it is also important to note that the stated purpose of the magazine is quite different from its readership, in that the journal was, by and large, read by only a small section of the diaspora that encompassed a minority group of educated elite from the Straits-born Chinese community. This is demonstrated through the activities and literary pursuits of the journal’s editors and writers, which reveal a profound concern in particular for the socio-cultural and educational advancement of the diaspora, borne in part from their knowledge of and interests in certain Western cultural and literary trends that were taking place in Britain during the nineteenth century.

As a journal that was read and produced by a minority group of Straits-born Chinese readers, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* represents the work of a diasporic community that strove for exclusiveness in its status as a diaspora, and exemplifies the ambitions of a class of diasporic subjects that attempted to create a culture that is different from that of the majority of the diaspora. The very title of the magazine

specifically refers to the Straits-born Chinese and their English speaking readers. Most of the magazine's literary publications also represent the early creative effort of a select group of Straits-born intelligentsia. Two prominent members in this group undertook the responsibility of producing and putting together the magazine: Dr. Lim Boon Keng (1869-1957) and Song Ong Siang (1871-1941). A brief biography of the editors provides a clearer picture of the cultural and literary impetus that lay behind many of their writings.

Both Song and Lim came from Straits-born Chinese families that originated during the early immigration of Chinese people to Malaya during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Lim's grandfather was a China-born Hokkien who arrived in Penang in 1839. His grandmother and mother were Nonyas, the former hailing from Penang and the other from Malacca. The family subsequently migrated and settled in Singapore. Like most Straits-born Chinese, Lim's family were of a higher class than *the rest of the China-borns. His father and grandfather were businessmen who earned their living managing the spirit and opium farms of Cheang Hong Lim, seen by the British as a major player in the Hokkien community.*⁴³ Lim, as well as Song, went to Britain for their higher education and returned to the settlement thereafter. They represent a growing group of diasporic individuals who, unlike their forefathers, experienced the best of British education and were exposed to the knowledge and thoughts of English institutions. Song was a British-trained lawyer from Cambridge, and Lim a medical practitioner trained in Edinburgh. Both were also recipients of the Queen's scholarship, an award initiated by the colonial government and aimed at

⁴³ More on the life of Lim Boon Keng's biography read Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas*, p.203.

enabling young local men, in the absence of a local university, to further their studies and obtain professional qualifications in Britain.⁴⁴ Upon their return to Singapore, the two editors co-founded and launched *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in 1897.

The personal background of the editors as Straits-born Chinese writers educated in Britain may help to explain some of their pre-occupations and concerns. The educational training and experience of both Lim and Song nurtured their cultural perspectives and intellectual inclinations. Their work in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* reveals that they were geared towards the engineering of a new cultural and intellectual movement in nineteenth century Singapore, and especially towards an increased Western outlook. It is clear from their writings that the editors took it upon themselves to lead and educate their community culturally and intellectually. As Lim states in the magazine, '[n]o people in the world appreciate the benefits of education and understand its civilising influence so sincerely or so well as we do.'⁴⁵ The notion of education as a 'civilising influence' here is significant. The implicit assumption in Lim's statement is that education, and in particular Western education, is a privileged source of knowledge, and his comment reflects the extent to which a Western or modern belief system has entered the mind-set and belief systems of the Straits-born Chinese. Although it is ambiguous whether the "we" here refers to the editors or the community in general, what does seem clear is that *The Straits Chinese Magazine* was intended as a platform for intellectual and social reforms in the diaspora. As Lim goes on to write:

⁴⁴ Koh Tai Ann, 'Literature in English by the Chinese' in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Chinese Adaptation and Diversity: Essays on Society and Literature in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore*, 1993, p.128.

⁴⁵ Lim Boon Keng, *op. cit.*, p.53.

With a more liberal course of studies, including science and mathematics, our Chinese schools will become the complement of the English schools. We should in this way be able to maintain perfect whatever is best in our own language and customs and to replace what is questionable or undesirable by the introduction of the acknowledged good points of Western civilisation.⁴⁶

The above narrative shows the degree to which Lim's Western schooling has inspired his vision for the colony. It is clear from this that he welcomes the innovative ideas of modernisation and shows considerable conviction and enterprise in seeking to revolutionise social customs and attitudes toward education. The narrative also demonstrates his conviction that the pursuit of education is a means of social mobility within the diaspora. To that extent, it is thus clear again that Lim's underlying principles have been influenced by the ideas of educational and social reforms that had also pervaded Britain during the time. Lim's stress on the benefits of education, and on the maintenance of the 'best in our own language and customs', reflect the ambitions of the nineteenth century British intellectuals such as Arnold and Newman, as discussed earlier, who attempted likewise to advance the intellectual culture of civilisation. As Newman describes so aptly, 'as the body may be tended, cherished, and exercised with a simple view to its general health, so may the intellect also be generally exercised in order to its perfect state.'⁴⁷ Newman's emphasis here on the nourishment of the intellect 'to its perfect state' correlates with Lim's own assertion to 'maintain perfect whatever is best ...', and the common use of the adverb 'perfect', albeit in different contexts, reveal a similar attitude towards the pursuit of intellectual perfection. At the same time, what is also interesting from Lim's excerpt is that his proposal to integrate the Chinese system of education with the Western one signifies

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p.55.

⁴⁷ J.H. Newman, *On the Scope and Nature of University Education*, London; Dent, 1915, pp.201-202.

his ambition to achieve a synthesis, albeit an uneven one, between the traditional Chinese world on the one hand, and the Western world on the other.⁴⁸

Indeed, the editors may be said to represent diasporic subjects working and negotiating a space for themselves within the framework of two distinct cultures: the colonial and the ancestral. This ambition was not only the impetus behind many of their articles on cultural and social reforms, but was also the motivation behind some of the literary pursuits and intellectual activities of the community. The founding of the Chinese Philomathic Society for example, is another project which exemplifies the Straits-born Chinese's efforts to try and establish a link between the Chinese world and the Western world. The society was started by Lim in 1896,⁴⁹ and his efforts, as the report of March 1897 states, were supported by 'prominent Chinese' such as 'Tan Jiak Kim, Seah Leang Seah, Tan Keong Saik, [and] Tan Hup Seng'. It appears that the society came together monthly, at times to attend the lectures delivered by guest speakers, and at others to be at social gatherings. A committee of members helped run the society, which was comprised of three members of councils, a secretary, a treasurer, as well as a president and vice-president. The latter two posts were held by Lim and Song respectively. The editors' dual roles as co-founders of *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, as well as president and deputy president of The Chinese Philomathic Society, meant that they were able to establish a close link between the two organisations. This would explain some of the publications where the essays delivered at sessions organised by the society were later published in the magazine. It was common, for instance, to find the activities of The Chinese Philomathic Society

⁴⁸ A tribute paid to Lim in *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas* refers to him as the 'sage of Singapore who bridged the British and Chinese worlds in a way no Singaporean had done before.'

presented and produced in the magazine, often in the form of lectures and meetings, and appearing under the heading of 'News and Notes'. As a society that was devoted to the study of both the Western and Eastern culture, the interests of The Society ranged from the local to the foreign, including subjects such as English literature, Western music, Chinese language, and Chinese philosophy. The minutes of the society's meetings published in the March issue of 1897, for instance, provide a list of themes and topics that were discussed in the preceding year, such as 'The Teaching of Confucius', 'The Crust of the Earth', and 'Prehistoric Chinese Rulers', all of which, as the article states, 'are of vital importance or of great interest'.⁵⁰

Furthermore, as a society that brought together a group of Straits-born Chinese for the regular study and appreciation of various intellectual and literary subjects, The Chinese Philomatic Society also reveals, significantly, a preoccupation on the part of the Straits-borns with discourses of a scientific and anthropological nature. Anthropology, as William Haviland writes, 'has emerged as a more scientific approach over the last 200 years',⁵¹ where the study of *homo sapiens*, the human species, has taken on the use of science to arrive at an understanding of human diversity. In addition, as a profession that emerged in Britain and Western Europe during the nineteenth century, the development of anthropology was also intrinsically linked to Western imperialism, and the writings of the magazine that were of an anthropological bent reflect the extent to which the journal operated within the discourse of

Lynn Pan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.203.

⁴⁹ 'The Chinese Philomatic Society' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.1 No.1 March 1897, p.32.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ William A. Haviland, *Anthropology*, Vermont: University of Vermont, 1974, p.3.

colonialism.⁵² The Straits-born Chinese's preoccupation with science and anthropology, thus helps explain some of the writings in the magazine, which were written frequently from an anthropological, scientific, and at times, colonial perspective. These writings are significant in demonstrating literary awareness and interests on the part of the Straits-born Chinese in the intellectual trends that were taking off in Europe at the time. For instance, a report on one of the society's meeting held on 7 April 1898 and published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in June the same year, states that on the request of its members, 'two courses of lectures have been started on "Elementary Science", and 'these lectures have so far been well attended.'⁵³ While the proceedings of the lectures were not published, the fact that they were 'well attended' by the Straits-born Chinese hints strongly at the scientific interests of the community. In addition, another report in the September issue of 1898, also notes a lecture on 'the Darwinian explanation of evolution' that had been delivered by the Duke of Argyll and attended by the Straits-born community, thus shedding light on the kind of scientific and anthropological studies that may have well influenced the thoughts and interests of its members.

The amount of space devoted in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* to current developments in the field of science, also reinforces the profound interests of the Straits-born people in the subject. Essays such as 'Infectious Diseases and the Public', 'Digestion', and 'Four Years in Bangkok' for instance, demonstrate the interests of the Straits-born Chinese in the field of medical and biological science, as well as

⁵² For more on the subject of anthropology and colonialism see George W. Stocking Jr (ed.), *Colonial Situations. Essay on the Contextualisation of Ethnographic Knowledge*, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, and Talal Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, London: Ithaca Press, 1973.

⁵³ 'Chinese Philomathic Society' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.2 No.6, June 1898, p.79.

ethnography. As an article published in March 1898 states, '[t]he future of Straits-born people 'depends to a large extent upon their ability to keep abreast with the progress of the arts and sciences.'⁵⁴ The proceedings of The Chinese Philomathic Society and the publications of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* provide an analysis of the emergent scholarly discourses that had pervaded Europe during the time. By the middle of the nineteenth century in Britain, there was an increasing concern with the study of human kind - their behaviour, history, and origins - and this was informed significantly by some of the publications that had emerged during the period, such as Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859.⁵⁵ The academic and literary culture of the Victorian age also saw the proliferation of intellectual societies such as the 'Anthropological Society of London', which was established in 1863. The influence of these learned groups, as Brian Street suggests, 'was given stimulus by the archaeological discoveries of the age, by Darwin's theory of evolution and by the acquisition of colonies in the 1880s.'⁵⁶ It would thus appear more than accidental that the literary and scholarly traditions that had developed in Britain during the period coincide to some extent with the anthropological and scientific writings that had emerged in the magazine. Such an concurrence undoubtedly reveals the importance of the new ideas of Western scientists and anthropologists, whose findings and theories provided a framework of thought for the Straits-born Chinese. It is therefore not surprising that within *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, the amount of space allocated to scientific and anthropological commentaries illustrate the profound interest of the community in these subjects. As

⁵⁴ 'Self-Culture' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.2 No.5 March 1898, p.34.

⁵⁵ Brian V. Street, *The Savage in Literature: Representations of Primitive Society in English Fiction 1858-1920*, London: London & Kegan Paul, 1975, p.3.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

Song and Lim assert in their address in 1897, the intentions for the magazine is to 'arouse public interest in literary, philosophic and scientific matters'.⁵⁷

The kinds of writings that were produced in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* are symptomatic of the literary pursuits and intellectual interests of the Straits-born Chinese. The fact that Lim and Song were British-educated intellectuals who had collaborated and established the journal is significant. Koh comments that their co-founding of the magazine was an early effort to lead the way in 'elevating and widening the cultural consciousness of the Straits-born Chinese in particular, and the English-educated Chinese in general.'⁵⁸ The editors' backgrounds provided the necessary "leverage" to enable them to strive for the development and reformation of the colony. Moreover, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* is indicative of the material and intellectual beliefs of the editors and their ideas of social advancement and modernity. In an essay entitled 'Our Enemies', for instance, Lim exhorts all Straits-born Chinese to be more receptive toward 'European culture with its greater intellectual freedom,'⁵⁹ and he goes on to warn that 'any one who stands in the way of our progress, advancement or happiness is our enemy.'⁶⁰ Thus, what is crucial to the founding of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* is the presence of a diasporic class - the Straits-born Chinese, striving for social advancement within the settlement. In this sense, while the "real" hegemony⁶¹ lies with the British colonisers, the Straits-borns are mediators of

⁵⁷ 'Chinese Philomathic Society', *op. cit.*, p.79.

⁵⁸ Koh Tai Ann, *op. cit.*, p.128.

⁵⁹ Lim Boon Keng, *op. cit.*, p.52.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ I use the term 'hegemony' here as it was coined and popularised by Antonio Gramsci. 'Hegemony' originally refers to the domination of one state by a ruling power. Used in this sentence, 'hegemony' refers to the power of the ruling class (in this case the Straits-born Chinese) to assert authority over the other classes. This is achieved not by coercion, but by a more subtle force through education and the medium of the magazine. Having said this, it is important to emphasise that while the Straits-born

this hegemony, and are perceived to assume what I describe as an “intra-ethnic” hegemony within the diasporic community itself. By “Intra-ethnic hegemony” here I mean the authority and power that the Straits Chinese assume over the China-borns within the diasporic community, and the unequal power relations that exist between the two groups. In this context, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* reflects the ambitions of the Straits-borns in their desire for authority and power over the rest of the diaspora. This is reinforced at the outset of the editors’ address to their readers:

we can now reckon upon a large number of Straits-born people of all nationalities who are in every respect better educated than those of a former generation. Amongst this class, the need has been for some time felt of having a medium for the discussion of political, social, and other matters affecting the Straits people generally, and some sort of periodical literature adapted to the present requirements of our population.⁶²

By referring to themselves as ‘this class’, the editors, are in fact, reinforcing the inherent class and power differences within the diaspora, between the English-educated Straits-borns who sought to maintain their links with their Chinese heritage while valuing the modernising force of English, and the less-educated China-borns who could presumably only read, speak, and perhaps write the Chinese language. Thus, the English language, and with it the Straits Chinese as users of this language, are automatically linked to “literacy” and power, while the China-borns and users of the Chinese language, are relegated to a lower status.

Chinese strive for authority over the rest of the Chinese community, they still function as a comprador in the diaspora, and remain bounded by the “actual” hegemony of the British colonists.

⁶² The Editors, ‘Our Programme’, p.1.

In light of the class disparity within the diaspora, Tan Tek Soon, another regular writer for the magazine, gives a clear account of the Straits-born Chinese' position regarding the China-borns:

The half-naked jinricksha puller, the coolie groaning under his heavy load, the shopkeeper bargaining with his customer, the sleek merchant lolling in his well-equipped carriage, are perhaps the readiest objects suggested to the mind's eye in recalling the picture of the Chinaman in the Straits. We seldom associate any of them with literature or literary achievement of any kind.⁶³

The word 'Chinaman' that occurs in the second last line of the narrative above is a generic term often used in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* to refer to the China-born Chinese. For instance, in an article published in 1899 and entitled 'Local Chinese Social Organisations', the writer discusses the organisation of this community according to the various dialects, and uses the term 'Chinaman' to refer to the China-borns in general.⁶⁴ Hence, the phrase 'Chinaman in the Straits' in Tan's remarks above, denotes any China-born migrant residing in the Straits Settlements, and the term 'Chinaman' could mean the Chinese labourers who constituted the majority of the migrant population, such as the 'jinricksha puller' or the 'coolie', or it could also refer to the shopkeeper or merchant who were likewise China-borns, but of a different class by virtue of their wealth which they had acquired from their stay in the settlement.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the 'we' in the second last line of the excerpt refers to the Straits-born Chinese, and the writer suggests that members of this group seldom associate the Chinamen 'with literature or literary achievement of any kind'. In this sense, the China-borns are constructed as separate from, and antagonistic to the better educated Straits-

⁶³ Tan Tek Soon, *op. cit.*, June 1897, p.63.

⁶⁴ By a Straits Chinese, 'Local Chinese Social Organisations', p.43.

born Chinese. Chapter Two has argued that the two diasporic groups are distinct in terms of language use, cultural orientation, political orientation and social status, and the above narrative reinforces this. Such a segmentation of people by class and education partitioned the diaspora as a whole into two social classes: an elite class that existed within the Straits-born Chinese group, and a lower class as represented by the China-born Chinese; a classification that stakes out for the former a separate and dominant position within the diaspora as a whole.

At the same time, the editors' address in the foremost volume also gives an indication of their position regarding the kind of writings that were to be published within the magazine, and which encompass 'some sort of periodical literature adapted to the present requirements of our population.'⁶⁶ Towards the end of the editorial page, the editors make explicit their intentions to give special attention 'to education and to science in all its branches in so far as these conduce [*sic*] to a nobler and higher view of life'.⁶⁷ The phrase 'a nobler and higher view of life' demonstrates that *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, as a vehicle of intellectual production, could thus be seen as a representation of an elite diasporic culture negotiated within colonialism. This is reinforced by Philip Holden's research on the magazine which suggests that the writings resemble the Arnoldian connotations of high culture and refinement that pervaded much of the literary history of the colonial power during the early twentieth century.⁶⁸ The editors place significant value on so-called 'high-brow' activities of cultural attainment and literary appreciation, which they deemed necessary on moral

⁶⁵ Read section two of Chapter One for the constitution of the China-born Chinese community.

⁶⁶ The Editors, *op. cit.*, p.1.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p.2.

⁶⁸ Philip Holden, 'Colonial Fiction, Hybrid Lives: Early Singaporean Fiction in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*' in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 33 No. 1, 1998 p.87.

and intellectual grounds. This was in turn supported by the work of The Chinese Philomathic Society as discussed earlier, which maintained the Arnoldian tradition that the culture of Western literary studies is a privileged domain of human expression.⁶⁹ Thus, the establishment of both the magazine and the society brought into being a diaspora that was held together above all by a shared “hybrid” culture of this kind, and sustained by what they saw as universal values of reason, liberty and progress.

Thus, despite the apparent aims of the editors to take upon themselves to inform and instruct the “wider public” of the need for social and intellectual advancement, the magazine is really an exclusive publication which addresses only a very small section of the diaspora. The editors comment that the primary object of the magazine is ‘to promote intellectual activity amongst the Straits-born people [of all nationalities], and to guide the present chaotic state of public opinion among them to some definite end.’⁷⁰ While they refer to ‘Straits-born people’ as their intended audience, their readers were really an elite group of Straits Chinese individuals. In which case, the publication of the magazine serves as a reminder of the social gulf rather than a bond between the modernised, Western-educated Straits-born Chinese, and the rest of the Chinese community. In this respect, Gramsci’s analysis of power relations is perhaps an appropriate point of reference to examine this struggle of hegemony within the diaspora.⁷¹ His conception of the struggle for power as a

⁶⁹ For more on the society see Lynn Pan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.203. *The Straits Chinese Magazine* also publishes minutes of the meetings held by the society. See, for instance, ‘The Chinese Philomathic Society, Singapore’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.1 No.1, p.32; ‘Chinese Philomathic Society’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.1 No.3, Sept.1897, p.113.

⁷⁰ The Editors, *op. cit.*, p.2.

⁷¹ Raymond Williams defines the concept of ‘hegemony’ as it has been theorised by Antonio Gramsci. ‘Hegemony’, as William elaborates, is ‘the whole body of practices and expectations’ that preside over ‘the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world.’ (p.110) Thus, ‘hegemony’, according to Williams is ‘a lived system of meanings and

combination of domination plus intellectual leadership characterises the aspirations of the Straits Chinese in their assertion of ideological and moral influence over a diasporic community. Despite the fact that members of this group are subject to the existing and powerful hegemony of the colonial government, they can be said to stake for themselves a claim to power, in collaboration with their colonial masters, in their function as a mediating, diasporic class. As the editors, Lim and Song, emphasise, the very name of the magazine indicates that 'it will mainly be controlled and carried on by Straits-Chinese.'⁷²

Moreover, as a journal which is written predominantly in the English language, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* shows that attempts at literary production and literary readership is limited to a specific linguistic group. Thus, despite their appeal to 'Straits-born people of all nationalities', the magazine was in real terms restricted to an educated minority in the diaspora. This is because access to the magazine is made available solely to the Straits-born Chinese who used English as a form of expression. During the time the magazine was in circulation, many in the community attended English-medium schools and were educated in the English language. This is clearly evident in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* when Lim states that one of the advantages of the British occupation of Malaya is the introduction of 'English schools to which the Chinese from the beginning have sent their children most willingly and gratefully.'⁷³ The 'Chinese' here refers to the Straits-born Chinese, and Lim goes on to state that a 'good English education is, without a doubt, the best legacy a Chinese or any other

values', and one that constitutes a sense of reality for most people in society. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

⁷² The Editors, *op. cit.*, p.2.

⁷³ Lim Boon Keng, *op. cit.*, p.54.

parent in the British Empire can leave to his children.’⁷⁴ It is therefore hardly surprising that the local Straits Chinese were the ones who published, edited and subscribed to *The Straits Chinese Magazine*. At the same time, it must be said that the magazine’s readership was evidently much smaller than that of the contemporary Chinese language newspapers *Lat Pau*, or *Nanyang Siang Pau*, as it was targeted at a minority English-speaking readership in the settlement.

Cultural Reforms and Retrieval: Paradoxes in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, with Reference to ‘The Chinese View of Cremation’, ‘The Position of Chinese Women’, and Essays on Confucianism.

The discussion in earlier sections has demonstrated that the purpose of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* was to reach out to Straits-born people of all nationalities. The aim of the journal, however, was at variance with its readership, which consisted by and large of a minority group of educated elites from the Straits Chinese community, who were profoundly influenced by certain scientific, literary, and anthropological trends that were prevalent in Britain during the time. This conflict within the magazine is revealed through the editors’ address and its various narratives, which served to illustrate that the journal was not without contradictions.

Yet, on closer examination, the problem with *The Straits Chinese Magazine* is not simply one of readership. As this section reveals, the contentions concerning the journal’s intended and “actual” audience are symptomatic of the conflicts and paradoxes that pervade the discourse of the magazine. Many of the narratives in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* are paradoxical in the sense that they reveal a struggle on

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

the part of the Straits-born Chinese subject to locate itself at the intersection of two axes: the colonial world on the one hand, and the ancestral world on the other. Most of the narratives in the magazine revolve around the theme of tradition versus modernity, and what emerges from these writings is a community of diasporic subjects attempting to reform and revolutionise, while simultaneously attempting to regenerate aspects of their ancestral culture and customs. These reforms, as we shall soon see, was inspired in part, by a similar Reform Movement that was taking place in China during the time, and brought to light a diaspora articulating for themselves a contradictory, hybrid, Anglo-Chinese identity that is neither “purely” Chinese nor European in culture, and one that embodies the difficulties inherent in locating the diaspora in any one subject position.

The tensions between colonial and ancestral positions, as experienced by the Straits-born Chinese in the diaspora, are captured in the texts published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*. As Lim has written, the Straits-borns ‘are now in the state of transition, socially and intellectually, between the old ways of our forefathers and the new doctrines of European civilisation.’⁷⁵ Throughout its circulation, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* was used as a platform to urge all Straits Chinese to undertake radical reforms in society. These reforms call for the improvement of social conditions in the colony, as well as the reconstitution of ancestral and religious practices in the diasporic community. To start with however, the reform movement must be seen in its wider historical context, and as a product of the shifting social and cultural circumstances of China that had effected it. During the late nineteenth century, a group of intellectuals in China campaigned for the political and cultural revolution of the

country, and formed what was known as 'The Reform Party of Peking'. The driving force behind the Party was Kang Yu Wei (1858-1927) and his contemporary Sun Yat Sen (1866-1925). Both Kang and Sun, along with their fellow supporters, were 'intelligent and progressive scholars' who came predominantly from the Canton, Foochow, and Shanghai region, and who 'saw that the only hope for the country lay in thorough administrative and political reforms, beginning from the central body at Peking.'⁷⁶ The impetus behind their campaign is made clear in an article published in 1900, which states that the literati of China had opened their eyes to the corrupt and 'deplorable inefficiency of the Central government'.⁷⁷ The reform movement of China thus began as an attempt on the part of the Chinese people to dominate and alter the political and social structure of the Chinese empire. The reformers urged the necessity to revolutionise archaic ideas and principles, and to abolish 'antiquated institutions of their native land'.⁷⁸ To this end, the Reform Party of Peking was an ambitious revolutionary group, who advocated a change in the whole Chinese pattern of existence, by introducing innovative thinking and a disregard for archaic habits and conventions.

Yet, despite the efforts of the Peking reformers, who were deemed a 'hopeful sign of the resources of the people', their attempts at reforms proved eventually futile. An essay in 1898 reveals that the 'internal struggles of the Party are but the prelude of greater strifes to come ...',⁷⁹ where its leaders and supporters were consequently persecuted, 'their innocent families imprisoned and the graves of their ancestors

⁷⁵ Lim Boon Keng, *op. cit.*, p.52.

⁷⁶ 'The Peking Coup D'etat of 1898' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.4 No.15, Sept. 1900, p.95.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ By One of Them, 'The Reform Movement Among the Straits Chinese' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.2 No.8 Dec.1898, p.172.

desecrated.’⁸⁰ The plight, and indeed work, of the Peking reformers however, did succeed in eliciting the sympathy of fellow Chinese, who saw them as ‘reform martyrs who stirred the hearts of millions throughout the Middle Kingdom and in the world.’⁸¹ To that extent, while the Peking reformers were eventually disbanded, their ambitions and ideas prevailed, serving to encourage the rest of the community of the need for social and national regeneration. Within this context, it would appear that the activities of The Reform Party of Peking inspired a similar movement amongst the Straits-born Chinese, who shared a common view in their assertions of the need for social advancement. As a local writer states in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, ‘the progress of reform in China cannot but interest us’.⁸² The essay of 1898 also affirms that the reformers in both China and Singapore ‘were as alike as under the different circumstances they could be’, where the ambitions of the Straits-born Chinese paralleled the efforts of their Chinese counterparts, who were likewise motivated by the desire to change and revolutionise society. There was however, a significant difference between the two groups, in that each differed in the degree of their political affiliations; while the aims of the reformers in China were social and political, the aims of those in Singapore as the article in 1899 states, were ‘purely social and intellectual’, and ‘have nothing to do with political scheming’.⁸³

The main initiators behind the reforms in Singapore were Lim and Song, although there was also the writer Tan Tek Soon, who, as Hong Lysa suggests, was a

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ ‘The Peking Coup D’etat of 1898’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, *op. cit.*, p.97.

⁸¹ By One of Them, ‘The Reform Movement Among the Straits Chinese’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, *op. cit.*, p.174.

⁸² *ibid.*, p.173.

⁸³ *ibid.*

reformer like the editors.⁸⁴ A regular contributor to the magazine, Tan promoted the Western concepts of liberal freedom, individual autonomy, and social advancement, while Lim, for instance, played a central role in the Straits-born reform movement at the turn of the twentieth century, and campaigned for the removal of superstitious practices in Chinese folk and religious life.⁸⁵ He criticised the lack of moral education in the Straits Chinese home which he believed showed the ‘meaningless practice of idolatry and the performance of sacrifices to the dead.’⁸⁶ Moreover, Lim called for the ‘religious reformation of the Straits Chinese’, and advocated the ‘total abolition of idolatrous practices, and the discontinuance of rites such as are founded on superstitions.’⁸⁷ His efforts, as exemplified by his remarks on the practice of idolatry, reflect his desire for social and cultural changes in society, which are evident throughout the magazine. They also demonstrate the ways in which Lim, as well as his contemporaries Song and Tan, negotiate their Anglo-Chinese identity, and articulate their affiliations or dis-affiliations to the English and Chinese cultures. As Hong Lysa writes, ‘Lim saw the necessity of reform aimed at a dynamic identity for the Straits-born Chinese, through a delicate balance of the two heritages.’⁸⁸ Following Hong’s assertion, I have chosen two essays here by way of further illustration: ‘The Chinese View of Cremation’ by Tan Tek Soon and ‘The Position of Women’ by Song Ong Siang.

⁸⁴ Hong Lysa, ‘The Intellectual Awakening and Social Reforms of the Chinese in Singapore (1894-1910), University of Singapore, 1975. (Unpublished honours dissertation)

⁸⁵ Lynn Pan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.203.

⁸⁶ Lim Boon Keng, ‘Straits Chinese Reform’, p.104.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.166.

⁸⁸ Hong Lysa, *op. cit.*, p.26.

The Straits-born Chinese's attempt at social reform is illustrated in an essay written by Tan and entitled 'The Chinese View of Cremation'.⁸⁹ At the beginning of the essay, Tan reviews the Chinese attitude to cremation and then discusses the religious and philosophical teachings that underpin these views, particularly in relation to the philosophical teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. He claims that Buddhists would regard 'with indifference, if not welcoming' the adoption of cremation.⁹⁰ This is due to the Buddhist belief that the human body is a mere shell for the soul and thus the way in which the dead are disposed of is thought to be relatively unimportant. Moreover, as Tan elaborates in defence of his conviction, the custom of cremation is a practice that had been sanctioned by the Buddhist religion and brought about by 'Indian Buddhist Missionaries who first promulgated their faith among the [Chinese] people. Such custom provided the impetus for the cremation of Buddhist priests even in ancient China.'⁹¹

On the other hand, unlike the Buddhists, the Confucians and Taoists would view cremation warily. Such caution stems from the belief that man partakes in as well as originates from both Heaven and Earth and consequently, the human body is a sacred spiritual entity. According to Confucianism and Taoism, care must be taken to "preserve" the human body, and to keep it in its physical state at the time of burial. For these reasons, both the China-borns and the Straits-borns remain attached to their traditional custom of burying instead of cremating the dead. The essay, however, is more than just a simple discussion of the different traditions and religious rites of dealing with the dead. Rather, it is a critical reflection of how the practice of cremation

⁸⁹ Tan Tek Soon, 'The Chinese View of Cremation' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.2 No.7, September 1898, p.81.

can be adopted as a more efficient and improved method of dealing with dead bodies. Tan's critique becomes all the more apparent when he argues that the Chinese are unable to conceive the human spirit as being 'apart from some sort of [physical] form', and that, 'on sanitary or other practical grounds', the practice of cremation must be taken up.⁹²

Referring to the diaspora as a whole, Tan then concludes in his essay that '[t]he greatest obstacle to its adoption among them will arise more from their religious, sentimental, or philosophical convictions than from others.'⁹³ There is a hint of social critique underlying the comment here as Tan implies that the Chinese are against the idea of cremation because of superstition and their belief-systems. He employs a clinical attitude and adopts a documentary format throughout the essay when discussing the traditional practices of burial. However, his tone turns into an earnest plea toward the end of the essay when he attempts to convince his readers to 'universally accept the expediency and benefits of their methods of disposing of the dead'.⁹⁴ Tan's stance on the subject of social and cultural reformation is clearly reflected in his efforts to look beyond the Chinese tradition of burial, and towards what appears to be a Western-inspired rationalism in his espousal of cremation. This rationalism is apparent when he maintains that the traditional custom of burial must be done away with for practical as well as health reasons 'in cases of epidemics'.⁹⁵ To that extent, Tan's essay also betrays an anthropological bias that pervades similar writings that were published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, as discussed in the earlier

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p.84.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*, p.81; p.83.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p.81.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p.84.

section. Tan's concern with the anthropological theme of cremation and sanitation, the position he has taken (as that of an amateur anthropologist "objectively" inquiring into the cultural practices of the community), and the style of writing he has adopted (that of ethnographic and pseudo-scientific in his examination of the parallels and differences between religions and cultures), all point towards the influence of the scientific and anthropological discourses that proliferated in Europe at the time. At the same time, what the essay on cremation and sanitation also implies, significantly, is an internal colonisation of the diaspora, where Lim's stance on the matter and chosen style of writing, remain characteristic of colonial anthropological discourses, as exemplified in the way he researches, studies, and records the way of life of his subject population.

The conclusion of Tan's essay is thus characteristically pragmatic, as he values and promotes the idea of cremation. This shows that Tan, like the editors of the magazine, who have been influenced by Western thoughts of modernity and individual autonomy, takes it upon himself to alter and reform the very foundations of his ancestral culture. He strives to revolutionise the practice of his inherited traditions in order to make them better suited to the conditions of modern civilisation. In the process, archaic forms of practices are foregrounded and questioned, and it appears Tan's conflict lies between the need for reform in a traditional society, and a desire for Western practices and a Western outlook. As he writes at the end of the essay:

In conclusion, I beg to state that although it would be extremely difficult to urge the Chinese to abandon their old practices in favour of some modern principles, they are nevertheless intensely alive to

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

whatever advantages the latter may possess, when compelled by necessity to accept its innovation.⁹⁶

Tan tactfully urges progress and reform, as he exhorts the Chinese to 'abandon their old practices in favour of some modern principles.' Interestingly, it is indicative of a new era of change within the life of the diaspora, where the traditional world of Chinese customs is negotiated and mediated along thoughts of Western modernity, and where members of the Straits-born community struggle to alter particular aspects of its decaying institutions. At the same time, however, it is ironic and contradictory that Tan calls upon the Chinese to abolish their 'old practices' in favour of cremation as a practice that is based on 'modern principles'. This is because at the beginning of the text, he speaks of cremation as an ancient religious practice that is derived from the Indian Buddhist faith. To suggest now that cremation should be accepted and practised as a means to the progress and "modernisation" of the diaspora seems to contradict his earlier assertions. It would therefore appear from this paradox that Tan is merely rehearsing the rhetoric of "modernity" as a feeble attempt, perhaps, to justify the abolition of what he perceives as an archaic and conservative practice. As he reiterates at the end of the essay, '[e]ven in China, soldiers when on active or foreign service, usually cremate the remains of their fallen comrades', and that they are therefore not perceived as 'conservative or so indifferent to progress as some would make them appear to be.'⁹⁷

Tan's essay on cremation demonstrates his desire to create and articulate for himself, and indeed his community, a sense of diasporic identity which is in tune with a

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p.84.

transforming cultural and social order. It also shows his affiliation with the colonial culture and his position as a diasporic subject who is located in a complex society under the aegis of colonial rule. This attempt at “modernising” and reforming ancestral traditions and cultural attitudes is characteristic of other articles in the magazine which likewise testify to a new era of change within the life of the diaspora. For example, in another essay published in 1897, the editor Song Ong Siang urges the need for social and intellectual advancement of the colony, and campaigns for the improvement of women’s status in the Straits-born Chinese community. This particular essay, entitled ‘The Position of Women’, was originally delivered to the Chinese Philomathic Society, and subsequently published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in 1897.⁹⁸ Song begins his article by reviewing the then current status of Nonyas in the community: ‘[t]he present generation of Nonyas, with a few exceptions, is a generation of illiterate and uneducated women. The only form of education that they do get is of a purely domestic character.’⁹⁹ He then goes on to assess the implications of this lack of education of women in the community:

Not being taught to read or write in Chinese, English or Malay, they are deprived all through life of the ordinary means of gleaning or obtaining knowledge from newspapers or journals, or of benefiting by the experience of other people recorded in books and other documents.¹⁰⁰

Song thus highlights the social and intellectual deprivation of women in the diaspora. Moreover, he criticises the gender inequality inherent in the community, and exposes the male-centred bias reflected in the nature of the gender system at the time. One of

⁹⁸ Song Ong Siang, ‘The Position of Chinese Women’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 1, March 1897, pp.16-23.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p.17.

the deplorable things about the present social status of Chinese women, he writes, 'is their utter dependence on the male sex.'¹⁰¹ He campaigns for the removal of this gender inequality, and one of the reforms that he calls for includes the promotion of education for the Nonyas: '[t]he women must in the first place be educated and that education must be of a wholesome character.'¹⁰² By 'wholesome' here Song is referring to the learning of elementary subjects such as reading and writing, 'whether in Chinese or English or both.'¹⁰³ He points out the benefits of education and the potential of women in bringing about revolutionary changes, and emphasises his point by asserting that 'the countries that have attained a high degree of civilisation are the countries where the women are held in honour and deep respect.'¹⁰⁴ Throughout the essay, Song celebrates the Nonyas' ability to become worthwhile intellectual beings. He was, in effect, arguing that women in the community could measure up to the men if given a chance to learn.

It is also apparent from the essay that Song's stance on the role and status of women in the Straits-born Chinese community has been imbued by Western ideas. He argues, for example, that one of the constraints that Nonyas face is the 'lack of liberty', and criticises the system which keeps women, 'more particularly the unmarried girls, confined within the four walls of a house, be that house a palace or hut.'¹⁰⁵ This custom of restricting the behaviour and freedom of the Straits-born female, as he goes on to elaborate, is derived from China, and is a practice that prohibits any social relations between women and men in the community until marriage. Song then

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p.18.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p.22.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.19.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p.18.

compares the status of women in the colony and to that of those in the West. He argues that both Straits-born and China-born women 'have not the same liberty of amusement as in Europe.'¹⁰⁶ They may be allowed access to friends, but these are restricted to the female gender and for these reasons, part of Song's aim is to ameliorate the position and education of women in the diasporic community.

The two essays on cremation and the position of women clearly reflect the Straits-born Chinese's desire for cultural and social reforms. It would seem that the main pre-occupations of such narratives are both cultural and educational. Furthermore, the pleas for reformation are mostly of a moralistic bent, where the writers evaluate the limitations and advantages of the old ways of the forefathers and the new ways of European civilisation. These essays depict the Straits-borns as a community propelled by a revolutionary urge to intellectually and socially transform the diaspora. In fact, the writings discussed here are typical of others in the magazine which likewise revolve around the notions of tradition versus modernity, and initiate the plea for reformation of Chinese social and cultural life in the diaspora, especially towards a more "Western" outlook. As Song states clearly in his essay on the position of women, he is 'charged with having much of [W]estern thought, and with being imbued with [W]estern ideas ...'¹⁰⁷ Song's remarks here betray the impetus behind the Straits-born Chinese's attempts to revolutionise the diaspora, in their role as a new middle-class intelligentsia who were themselves a product of the existing colonial culture.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p.19.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

Yet, while the essays on Chinese cremation and the position of women reveal an effort on the part of the Straits-borns to reform antiquated traditions and value-systems in line with thoughts of Western modernity, there are also other narratives in the magazine which, paradoxically, are indicative of an attempt by the community to regenerate ancestral traditions and customs. In that sense, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* is not without contradictions, and we see a dichotomy inherent in the Straits Chinese's quest as social and cultural reformers. The ensuing paragraphs will illuminate the tensions that these subjects articulated, and perhaps felt, about their affiliations, and at once dis-affiliations with their ancestral traditions. This anomaly of "in-betweenness", of identifying and yet not identifying with the ancestral culture, is a characteristic of diasporas and the diasporic subject. Lavie and Swedenburg suggest that diasporic subjects, and the ways in which they relate to their natal and ancestral heritage, are multiply positioned and in flux.¹⁰⁸ Thus, like the diasporic subjects in Su Zheng's essay on Chinese-American musicians who embody the experience of 'living between two or more worlds', the Straits-born Chinese and their Anglo-Chinese affiliations reflect a similar experience.¹⁰⁹

The significance of the essays published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* and discussed in this section lies not only in the recognition of a diasporic people's cultural and literary expressions, but also in the ambiguities and dilemmas faced by these people in their identification and dis-identification with their ancient traditions. Even as Lim, for example, exhorted the eradication of superstitions and idolatrous practices, he also wrote essays in the magazine in which he put forth his interpretations of Confucianism.

¹⁰⁸ Smadar Lavie and Swendenburg, *op. cit.*, p.21.

Thus, despite the fact that Straits Chinese individuals adopted the intellectual and social premises of “Western modernity” on which the colonial domination was based, they also sought to retain some aspects of the Chinese culture that was embedded in non-Western beliefs. In that context, Lim’s essays of Confucianism tended to be idealistic and forceful in appealing for the resuscitation of Confucian values by stressing their moral and cultural worth. Three essays in particular stand out: ‘The Basis of Confucian Ethics’,¹¹⁰ ‘The Duties of Parents and Teachers’,¹¹¹ and ‘The Confucian Doctrine of Brotherly Love’.¹¹²

In the essay ‘The Confucian Doctrine of Brotherly Love’, Lim emphasises the importance of love and respect between brothers, and the importance of fraternal relationships in the teachings of Confucius. The subject of ‘brotherly love’, as he suggests, ‘occupies a prominent place in Confucian ethics’,¹¹³ and the bond between brothers is an integral part of filial piety in the Confucian Classics. He goes on to explain that ‘[a]s the law of filial piety requires the son to love all that his father loves, it must follow that brotherly love is the first consequence of piety.’¹¹⁴ In Lim’s view, this notion of ‘brotherly love’ as it is derived from the Confucian doctrine of filial piety, is a fundamental principle to which every family should adhere. He elaborates its significance:

¹⁰⁹ Su Zheng, ‘Music Making in Cultural Displacement: The Chinese-American Odyssey’ in *Diaspora* 3:3, 1994, pp.273-288.

¹¹⁰ Lim Boon Keng, ‘The Basis of Confucian Ethics’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. VIII No. 3, Sept. 1904, pp.206-211.

¹¹¹ Lim Boon Keng, ‘The Duties of Parents and Teachers’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 4, September 1897, pp.147-151.

¹¹² Lim Boon Keng, ‘The Confucian Doctrine of Brotherly Love’ in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. ix No. 4, Dec. 1905, pp.169-173.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p.169.

As in the case of filial piety, the duties of the elder and younger brothers are reciprocal. The elder brother in the absence of the father is responsible for the education and support of the younger brothers, who in turn are required to behave to their senior as they would to their father.¹¹⁵

In the passage above, Lim discusses the responsibilities and duties of brothers as advocated by the teaching of Confucius. He espouses the need for mutual support and loyalty between brothers, and the reciprocal relations between male siblings in the family. This belief in the Confucian tenet of brotherly love is reinforced when Lim goes on to appeal for the 'continued maintenance of fraternal affection'.¹¹⁶ From his assertions in the essay, it would seem that he placed great value on the transmission of the social and moral behaviour of brothers, and his writing can be seen as an attempt to promote Confucian ideals in the diasporic community.

At the same time, in his writing on Confucianism, Lim criticises the prejudices of Western culture and brings to light the conflict between Christian beliefs and Confucian doctrines. He makes clear his adverse feelings toward particular Christian principles. Lim writes:

Some missionary writers have adversely commented on this teaching of Confucianism as a source of evil. The difficulty is in the ideal that is in view. From the standpoint of the average European, who has no intention whatever to carry out in practice the religion he is taught to

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *ibid.* Lim in his essay also recounts anecdotes from Chinese history which demonstrates the significance of the Confucian teaching of 'brotherly love'. For example, Emperor Ming-ti of the Han dynasty was noted for his great love for his brothers. There was also Emperor Ming-huang of the Tang dynasty who, according to Lim, 'shared with his four brothers all the dignities and pleasure which were within his power to give.' According to historical sources, when one of Emperor Ming-huang's brothers was ill, the Emperor himself undertook to prepare the concoction prescribed by the physician. Apart from the rulers of the Han and Tang dynasty, Lim also cites other famous characters from Chinese history who have likewise been commended for their fraternal affections, such as Yu-kun from the Chin dynasty and Chao Yen-hsiao from the Sung dynasty.

profess in his youth, the duties of a brother such as are enjoined by Confucianism, must seem irksome and intolerable. But looking upon ethical conduct as the highest achievement of *art*, we must admit that the best opportunities for the exercise of those divine gifts of benevolence, charity, humility and sincerity are only to be found in the intimate association of brothers.¹¹⁷

By the phrase ‘intimate association of brothers’ in the last sentence, Lim is referring to the fraternal bond between brothers which he had earlier discussed in the essay. The passage illustrates his stance on Western missionaries, Christianity, and their associations with Confucianism. In the very first sentence, Lim presents the conflict between Confucianism and Christianity, and claims that the introduction of Christianity has proved to be a source of conflict for Confucianism, for some missionaries viewed the latter as pagan, and as ‘a source of evil.’ The tone of voice here is gentle yet firm, asserting the benefits that could be found in the practice of brotherly love. In the use of the collective ‘we’ in the third last line, he is also suggesting that Confucianism belongs to the Chinese people, spiritually and culturally.

In addition, it is clear from the passage above that Lim seeks to work out the compatibilities and contradictions between the Western and Chinese cultures. In the process, the narratives he produced, such as that above, are rooted in the Confucian culture, and reveal his native understanding and value of traditional Chinese tenets and doctrines. The essay also reflects a moralistic bent. This is manifest when he urges members of the Straits-born Chinese community, on moralistic grounds, to embrace the teachings of Confucianism, and, as he says in the last three sentences, to ‘admit that the best opportunities for the exercise of those divine gifts of benevolence, charity, humility and sincerity are only to be found in the intimate association of brothers.’ It is

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.170.

apparent that Lim is critical of the Western teachings of Christianity, which he sees in opposition to the teachings of Confucianism. He also censures the hypocritical European who 'has no intentions whatsoever to carry out in practice the religion he is taught to profess in his youth.' Thus, in his writings on reforms and Confucianism as shown in the excerpt above, Lim calls for the regeneration of Confucianism, and the exercise of benevolence, charity and humility in the bond of brotherly love. He places great emphasis on the regeneration of Confucian teachings, and displays a genuine concern for the promotion of Chinese culture and identity. It would seem that Lim sought to remind his contemporaries of their cultural inheritance, and he has no qualms about the fact that while the Straits-born Chinese in the diaspora value their political allegiance to the colonial power, they should simultaneously claim an affinity to the Chinese culture.

The thrust of Lim's essay on the 'Confucian Doctrine of Brotherly Love' is repeated in his various other essays on Confucianism. It is clear that as co-editor of *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, and as one of the magazine's most active contributors, Lim played a crucial role in analysing the teachings of Confucius and in engaging with philosophical exposition on Confucian ethics. In another of his works on 'The Basis of Confucian Ethics', for instance, he expresses similar concern for the practice of benevolence and love, which he perceives as 'the keynote of the ethical code preserved for all time by the sagacity of the Master.'¹¹⁸ The 'master' here refers to Confucius, and, as he continues, 'wherever two men exist, then there is occasion for the exercise of love.'¹¹⁹ His article on the basis of Confucian ethics thus exemplifies once again his

¹¹⁸ Lim Boon Keng, *op. cit.*, p.206.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

extensive study of Confucianist ideas. Similarly, in the essay on the 'Duties of Parents and Teachers', Lim's sentiments on Confucianism tend to be forceful and idealistic, appealing for the resuscitation of the teachings of Confucius, stressing its moral and cultural value. He draws inspiration from China, and, in the essay, reinforces the teachings of the 'ancient sages of China that education was indispensable to a nation', and that the duty of parents and teachers is in ensuring the practice of this principle.¹²⁰ In his writing, Lim also professes the merits of an educational system in which 'all scholars have to obey their teachers as much as they have to obey their parents.'¹²¹ These principles on education, the duties of parents, and the obligations of scholars, were in consonance with the principles of Confucius, and he advises the Straits-born Chinese to 'apply these general principles of the Chinese to our educational system here.'¹²²

In several respects, by upholding Confucian values and practising its teachings, Lim exemplifies the desire of the Straits-born Chinese to foster a continuing identification with the traditions of their ancestral culture. This longing to create some form of connection with the Chinese culture is demonstrated not only in the writings on Confucianism, but in other literary works published within the magazine, such as the series of articles entitled 'Genuine Chinese Authors', discussed in the first section, which perform a similar function of restoring traditional forms of culture. Together, the articles on Chinese authors and the essays on Confucianism highlight the role of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* as a vehicle for cultural retrieval and regeneration. However, what they also reveal is an internal paradox inherent within the magazine. The essays

¹²⁰ Lim Boon Keng, 'The Duties of Parents and Teachers', p.147.

¹²¹ *ibid.*

on Confucian and Chinese culture contradict the essay on cremation and the position of women because while the essays on Confucianism are committed to the revival and preservation of the teachings of Confucius and Chinese culture for the community, the essay on cremation and 'The Position of Chinese Women' seem to attempt a break with tradition in place of Western thought and practice. It would therefore appear that in the process of attempting to achieve some form of connection between the Chinese world and the Western world, the narratives in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* are full of inner tensions and inconsistencies. Perhaps these contrasting essays could only be understood in the context of the Straits-born Chinese having one "foot" in the colonial culture, where thoughts of Western modernity were readily received, and the other in their ancestral community, where traditional values and beliefs were conceived.

Thus, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* reflects the cultural space inhabited by a group of English-educated individuals who continuously seek to maintain their identity and links with their Chinese heritage while at the same time valuing the modernising force of the English culture. The narratives in the magazine carry with them a similar thrust, and together they serve as a reminder of the interplay of cultural discourses that frame the identity of the community as a whole. In fact, the narratives depict the Straits Chinese as being at a linguistic and cultural crossroads, where their claims to ethnic identity and autonomy are at a cultural junction, giving new meanings to the notion of a Chinese diasporic identity; more specifically, it is an ethnicity based exclusively on the competing Chinese and Anglo-colonial cultural discourses. What seems clear from this is the fact that the writings and writers in the magazine, such as Lim, Tan, and

¹²² *ibid.*

Song, grappled with articulating this sense of identity in their own way, bequeathing a legacy of cultural contradictions.

Imperialism and *The Straits Chinese Magazine*: Colonial or Anti-Colonial?

All the narratives within *The Straits Chinese Magazine* have a bearing on still another crucial question - that of the relation of class and power within the diasporic society under colonial domination. To talk about a cultural space which *The Straits Chinese Magazine* inhabits is to also perceive the magazine as a site where the imperial encounters the other, and vice-versa. Imperialism and the colonial subject remain at the heart rather than at the periphery of the magazine. Following the discussion in the previous section on the Straits-born Chinese struggle for a compromised survival in the gap between East and West, it can be argued that the diaspora's cultural productions are often characterised by a particular kind of negotiation. It is a situation in which it must play off two aggressors, Britain and China, against each other, and stake out a space where it is neither the puppet of British colonialism nor of Chinese authoritarianism.

In the editors' address in the magazine's inaugural volume, Lim and Song hint at the cultural space that the magazine needs to occupy, particularly in relation to the colonial government. From the outset of the written address, the editors' claims to a cultural identity appear to be grounded in the relative autonomy of British colonial culture. This is evident at the beginning of its first publication where they remind readers that the publication of the magazine coincides with 'the most auspicious and

memorable year of the Victorian era.¹²³ By aligning the advent of the magazine with the heyday of the British empire, the editors are intent on asserting and cultivating a symbiotic relationship with the imperial power. This identification with the colonial culture is reinforced in the two men's tribute to the 'great advancement of education' brought about by colonialism:

We may congratulate ourselves that we have started our quarterly publication *The Straits Chinese Magazine* ... Owing to the great advancement of education within recent years in this colony, due to a large extent to the institution of the Queen Scholarships, we can now reckon upon a large number of Straits-born people of all nationalities who are in every respect better educated than those of a former generation.¹²⁴

What is striking from the above extract is that the Straits-born people are drawn into a civilisation that is alien to them, and they have measured the advancement of their community in terms of the standards set up by Western education. The editors attribute the advancement of education in the colony to the Scholarships that have been conferred by the British onto the Straits-born people, and they reveal an attempt on their part and on the part of the community to identify with the colonial culture's collective subjectivity,¹²⁵ which can be read in two ways. On the one hand, this can be perceived as a show of allegiance to the British, used tactfully on the part of the Straits-born Chinese to demand and/or assert their rights as British subjects. On the other hand, it can be read as a reflection of the desire of the Straits-borns to maintain the hegemonic powers of the colonial government, so as to stake out for themselves a cultural space within the discourse of colonialism. Edward Said, in his text *Culture and*

¹²³ The Editors, *op. cit.*, p.1.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ By 'collective subjectivity' here I mean the subject-position of the colonial; the historical, socio-cultural and political systems of knowledge that constitute the colonial culture and society as a whole.

Imperialism, alludes to this collaborating role of the colonised subject and its coloniser. Referring to the characters in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Said likens Ariel to 'a sort of bourgeois native', who is a willing servant of Prospero, and is 'untroubled by his collaboration' with the master.¹²⁶ Following Said, it could be said that his reading of *The Tempest* appropriately describes the situation of the Straits-born Chinese, who, in their status as a diasporic class, play the role of Ariel aptly, as a 'sort of bourgeois native', collaborating with and extending the hegemony of their colonial masters.

Imperialism therefore presents another kind of subjectivity for the diasporic individual where the conception of a diasporic identity is located in a power relation to the colonial. The narratives of the magazine underpin the workings of power between the British government and the Straits-born Chinese. Indeed, if imperialism is a way of maintaining an unequal relation of economic and political power (in the way that Said writes about Orientalism as a maintenance of superiority by the Westerner in the framing of the Orient within a body of knowledge and representations defined by the West), then there is no doubt that *The Straits Chinese Magazine* has not only failed to resist the colonial power, but has submitted to it. In fact, the magazine can be seen as a means of perpetuating the distinction made by Orientalism between "the Orient" and "the Occident".

In a society in which the colonial power has dominated, and in which the advancement of education, particularly the colonial language and education, is held to be a benchmark of adequacy, the demand of accession to colonialism seems to be an

¹²⁶ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1993, p.258.

inevitable reaction of the Straits-born Chinese. In that sense, it is hardly surprising to find that several other articles in the magazine, apart from the editorial address, are likewise motivated by a similar attempt to identify with the colonial power. These narratives reflect the Straits-born people's desire to compromise their native Chinese culture, and to take on the values of the colonial culture. For instance, in an article advocating the discarding of the Chinese *tow-chang* (queue), or the "pig-tail", the Straits-borns are exhorted to fully identify with the British culture. During the nineteenth century, the Manchu government looked upon the *tow-chang* as a sign of allegiance to its sovereign. For those who were loyal to the Manchu government, the *tow-chang* was a badge of honour. However, for many Straits-born Chinese who identified with the British, the *tow-chang* was perceived as a badge of slavery, and they are urged to abandon or alter the custom of wearing the queue as it stands in the way of 'progress' and 'the formation or adoption of views and doctrines [that are] in consonance with the culture of civilised nations.'¹²⁷ The 'civilised nation' here clearly encompasses the European civilisation, and the views and values of the West that are being adopted. The *tow-chang*, or queue, as Lim argues, is merely part of an external, cosmetic make up of the Chinese people, and 'merely a mode of doing up the hair'.¹²⁸ The custom of keeping a queue, is perceived as pointless because it does not serve a practical function, is inconvenient, lacks religious or cultural significance, and because of 'its absolute uselessness and inconvenience',¹²⁹ its abolition is strongly urged. Yet, while it may be the case that the wearing of the queue does not serve any practical function, it is also clear that the matter is not a simple question of practicality and convenience but is in itself tied to political ramifications. The queue was traditionally

¹²⁷ Lim Boon Keng, 'The Queue Question' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 3 No. 9, March 1899, p.23.

perceived as a sign of allegiance to the Manchu sovereign; the government which had earlier brought about the downfall of China's last remaining dynasty - the Qing government.¹³⁰ To suggest its abandonment is therefore of monumental political significance, especially for those remaining China-born Chinese who retained their status as Manchu subjects. For them, abandoning the queue would be tantamount to the severing of their political allegiance to the Manchu government.

At the same time, for the Straits-borns, the rejection of the queue is also significant as a symbol of identification with the colonial culture. The essay shows the lengths to which they were willing to go to defend their rights as British subjects, and submit to the imperial centre. As Lim writes:

But we Straits Chinese are free men! We are free in the sense that we are subjects of the Queen-Empress who governs the British empire on constitutional principles and through whom all the varied races under the aegis of the British flag are united in one bond of brotherly sympathy and accord. ... In view of those great and inestimable privileges we declare that it is unpatriotic and unwise on our part to allow the prejudices of our forefathers, who were not British subjects, to deter us from pursuing the only course to advancement socially and intellectually.¹³¹

The tone of the narrative voice here is powerful, passionate, and assertive in defining the Straits-born Chinese as colonial subjects. Moreover, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that these people desire to identify and to merge with the colonial culture's collective subjectivity, and the phrase 'subjects of the Queen-Empress' indicates that they perceive themselves as ruled by the colonial power. By acknowledging their status

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p.24.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ A brief explanation about the Manchu government in the history of China and the diaspora can be read in Chapter One.

as subjects of the Queen, the Straits Chinese claim their rights to what they perceive as the 'great and inestimable privileges' that have been bestowed upon them by the colonial rulers. The narrative therefore demonstrates that members of this diasporic group were conscious of their identity as different from the rest of the China-borns in the diaspora. It is, however, ironic at the beginning of the quotation above that the writer exhorts them to identify themselves as 'free men', without any awareness of the fact that they are, paradoxically, subjects of the colonial power. Instead, what seems to be implied by this phrase is that the Straits-borns are not subject to the trappings of their forefathers' culture and their inherited Chinese values. Hence, the Chinese culture is seen as imprisoning and constricting, while the colonial culture is perceived as liberating, and the narrator conveniently ignores the implications of being a "subject" of the British. Throughout the essay, the point of view of the narrator remains clear; that the wearing of a queue, as a custom of the Chinese culture, should therefore be discarded as a sign of the Straits-Chinese's claim to their rights as British subjects.

The narrative in the above quotation shows that British identity is continuously claimed on the part of the Straits-born Chinese, while their notion of a Chinese identity is constantly being negotiated. The narrative voice in the quotation reveals the determination of the community to adapt their ancestral customs and ways to the requirements of Western civilisation. The Straits-borns perceive themselves as British subjects, and seem keen to prevent themselves from being too deeply "rooted" in their ancestral culture for fear that 'unless some important step is definitely taken to indicate a forward march there will always be back-sliding, and then there is the convenient

¹³¹ Lim Boon Keng, *op. cit.*, p.23.

excuse, “Oh, we must not alter from the ways of our forefathers.”¹³² The narrative can be read as a passionate plea to the community to prevent the stagnation of the diasporic society, and to disengage from the pursuit of antiquated traditions of their ancestors. It appeals for reformation, and does so by seeking to represent itself in the image of the colonial power; to be “modern”, and to advance socially and intellectually ‘in consonance with the culture of civilised nations’.¹³³ There is enough evidence in the essay to show that the Straits Chinese desire to adapt their traditions to the ideas of the West. To achieve this, the narrative voice suggests the destruction of antiquated tradition, and the ushering in of modern, secular forces, in order that any serious attempts ‘to move with the time’¹³⁴ may be enacted. The writer then ends the essay on an emphatic note, ‘[t]he reform movement aims at the eventual emancipation of the Chinese from those social and intellectual restraints ..., and as a first step towards the goal, the *tow-chang* must go!’¹³⁵

Without a doubt, the Straits-born Chinese epitomise a diasporic community that is striving for social advancement, and one whose identity is culturally hybridised. This is reflected in their attempts to engineer social changes in the thoughts and attitudes of the diasporic community, as demonstrated through ‘The Queue Question’.¹³⁶ This call for reformation is reflective of other narratives discussed in the earlier section which likewise exhort the need for changes in society. These essays are part of what I would call narratives of social reform, and are characterised by a series of issues and concerns of the Straits-born community. However, what sets the essay of

¹³² *ibid.*, p.24.

¹³³ *ibid.*, p.23.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p.24.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p.25.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p.22.

the queue apart from the rest of the other essays is that alongside the plea for reform, there is a clear sense of patriotism to the British government, where, as the writer asserts, 'we are subjects of the Queen-Empress who governs the British Empire...'¹³⁷

Thus, from *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, there seems to be an abiding faith in the knowledge and ways of the British, and in the administration of the colonial government as a whole. As a linguistic, socio-cultural and political expression of the Straits Chinese, the magazine can be defined in terms of its identification with the colonial culture. It would seem that the legitimacy of British rule was never in question on the part of the Straits-borns. In fact, the advent of colonialism was regarded as a guarantee against superstition and social stagnation, and the magazine reveals the community's patriotism toward British sovereignty. For instance, to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, Lim wrote a tribute in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* on behalf of the Straits-born Chinese. In the article, he expresses indebtedness to the British empire and assures the 'loyalty of this generation of subjects who enjoyed peace, prosperity and plenty under the beneficent sway of the Queen-Empress.'¹³⁸ Lim's article gives a clear indication of the extent to which he, and perhaps the rest of his community, identify themselves politically as British subjects, and claim allegiance to the colonial power. As Holden has observed, '[i]f we look for an anti-colonial consciousness, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* is frustrating.'¹³⁹ Following on Holden's observation, it can be argued that what emerges instead is a community in close collaboration with the British rulers. For the Straits-born Chinese, the colonial government not only brought about modern and secular changes to the

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

diaspora, but also provided an effective and modern intellectual leadership over the diaspora. The magazine reflects a deep faith in the basic goodness of the colonial order and the continual support of its government.

On the part of the colonials, it is also true to say that they propagated the allegiance of the Straits-borns to the British government, as well as intervened in the community's attempts at social and cultural reform in so far as to encourage them in their endeavour. For instance, a colonial official, G.T. Hare, entreats the community to adopt the values and thoughts of Western civilisation. As a representative of the colonial government, Hare seemed eager to receive the Straits Chinese as British subjects, and says in an address to them: '[a]s you are well aware, you are British citizens enjoying by right of birth all the privileges and advantages that this birthright gives you.'¹⁴⁰ His address here may be dismissed as a rhetoric of appeasement, but it can also be read as an endorsement of the Straits Chinese's claim to British citizenship.

Discordant Voices in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*.

It would be tempting at this point to perceive *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, and its writers and editors, as functioning within the colonial system and adhering to the hegemonising social and cultural forces that operate within it. Yet, while this may be true to an extent, it is nevertheless too simplistic to discount the magazine as simply a manifestation of the dependent and deferential intent of the Straits Chinese to locate

¹³⁸ Lim Boon Keng, 'The Diamond Jubilee' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1 No 1, March 1897, p.26.

¹³⁹ Philip Holden, *op. cit.*, p.86.

¹⁴⁰ G.T. Hare, *op. cit.*, p.3.

themselves within the discursive site of British colonialism. Members of this diasporic group may have acknowledged the need for social reforms, but this is problematic when the call for reformation entails coming to terms with a cultural space and social order that is external and alien to them.

It appears from the editorial address and the essay on the queue that while the editors of the magazine identify with the colonial government, it is not merely the case that the writers of the magazine were silent and uncritically devoted to Western culture, thoughts, and values. As Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, '[n]ever was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native', and as he goes on to argue, 'there was *always* some form of active resistance'.¹⁴¹ In line with Said's recognition of the non-passive colonised subject, a closer reading of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* reveals that the Straits-born Chinese were not entirely inclined toward a colonial mentality. On the contrary, what seems to be emerging alongside the apparent alliance with British sovereignty is a simultaneous rejection of and resistance to the British identity and culture. Moreover, as discussed in the earlier sections, there appears to be an identification with the Chinese culture, and the search for a regeneration of the ancestral culture on the part of the community. What is suggested here is that alongside this evident accession to the colonial discourse, there is also a sense of agency, which becomes clear towards the end of the essay on the queue when the writer takes it upon himself to remind the Straits-born community of the value of their traditional culture:

We have too much to lose to forget that we are Chinese. Our opposers say that we wish to renounce our race! No, we do not wish that. If we did, we would have wished in vain, for if there is one thing man cannot do, it is to change physical features. A Chinese always remains a Chinese however he may dress and wherever he may live. Does anyone pretend that the long-queued European missionary in Mid-China is a Chinese? Certainly not.¹⁴²

The above narrative effectively illustrates the power and seriousness behind Lim's position as an influential rhetorician. The narrative tone is ironic and sarcastic as seen from the rhetorical question at the end of the quotation. The narrator chides his critics for harbouring the view that the abandonment of the queue is tantamount to a denunciation of the Chinese race. Lim clearly identifies with the Chinese culture and is aware of the cultural sensitivity surrounding the issue of the queue. It seems that this ancestral custom is rejected on the basis of it being an obstacle to progress, the phenotype is cherished as an indicator of the Chinese culture. The point of Lim's rhetoric is thus also a question of race. For him, jettisoning antiquated customs and costumes does not necessarily entail a mutation on the level of "essence" - of "Chineseness" or of Chinese identity, but rather, a maintenance of it. 'A Chinese', as Lim claims, 'always remains a Chinese', 'however he may dress and wherever he may live.'

The Straits-borns' attempt to negotiate a cultural space within colonialism is thus deeply contradictory, as seen from the essays above which highlight both a receptive and at the same time hostile attitude to the cultural model it tries to adapt. While on the one hand Lim accepts the rationale behind the colonial model by exhorting the abandonment of the queue, on the other hand there is a rejection of the

¹⁴¹ Edward Said, *op. cit.*, p.xii.

make-up of the colonial culture alien to the community, as exemplified when he cautions the audience against the renouncing of the Chinese race. Such evidence demonstrates how divided and conflicted the Straits-borns were on issues of identity and culture, especially in relation to the ancestral and colonial.

It is apparent that the contradiction described above pervades the discourse of the magazine. A similar paradox is reflected again in another essay by Lim, where he advocates the need to alter the dress and costume of the Straits-born people, and urges the community to discard the Chinese costume in favour of the European style of dress. At the same time, he also asserts that such a move is not to be regarded as a total abandonment of the Chinese style of dressing. As he writes:

Fortunately the reformers do not intend to do such an unwise thing as to give up the picturesque and comfortable Chinese dress for the sombre and tight-fitting costume now fashionable among Europeans. But we do intend to modify our present costume so as to improve it in various ways by adaptations and modifications so that while the principles remain essentially Chinese, details may be changed according to convenience, necessity and taste.¹⁴³

The passage above is significant in demonstrating the Straits Chinese's efforts to 'modernise' while at the same time assert a distinct cultural identity. The narrative suggests an adoption and modification of the traditional dress to the European style. However, it does so in a way that the mode of dressing remains essentially Chinese, in keeping with its 'picturesque and comfortable' style. The excerpt also reveals, to some degree, the ability of the Straits-borns to act autonomously as they are discerning

¹⁴² Lim Boon Keng, 'The Queue Question', p.25.

¹⁴³ Lim Boon Keng, 'Dress and Costume' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 3, No.10, June 1899, p.57.

about what they adopt from Western practices, and are deliberately selective about what they adapt. It would seem from the above quotation that even as the narrator challenges the colonial ways of dressing, he also accepts the practicality of 'necessity' and 'convenience' of the European style of dress. What emerges from Lim's writing is therefore a diasporic community claiming for itself a certain autonomy, as they produce for themselves a new, distinct style of dressing, but one that is also adapted from an assimilation of both the Chinese and European cultures.

In a similar way, the editors who hailed Britain's sovereignty in the first paragraph of the editorial address are the same diasporic subjects who simultaneously attempt to stake out a space within their Chinese culture, albeit in a modified way. This is reflected further along the editorial page towards the end of the address. The editors are resolved in proclaiming the real aim of the magazine, which as they perceive it, is not simply a means of promoting the advantages of colonial education, but, more importantly, to resuscitate the values of Chinese culture. The chief reason for this endeavour for cultural retrieval, as the editors state firmly, is that 'as Straits-born people become better educated, the majority of them, as a sort of penalty, will come to know less and less of the traditions and histories of their ancestors.'¹⁴⁴ Above all, the magazine is aimed at restoring to the Straits-born people 'the knowledge of their forefathers in English dress',¹⁴⁵ through the medium of a common language.

The 'forefathers' referred to in the above quotation are clearly Chinese. The editors or writers who speak on behalf of the Straits-born community are aware of a

¹⁴⁴ The Editors, *op. cit.*, p.2.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

possible erosion of their ethnic culture in the face of colonialism. What is striking here is that the editors stress the use of the English language, but it is perceived as an external, cosmetic item, 'a dress', and a common medium through which the knowledge of their Chinese forefathers could be accessed. What seems to be implied here is that the English language, and with it the British culture, is not to be perceived as part of the emotional and cultural make-up of the Straits Chinese. Furthermore, their attitude toward the English language could be seen as an awareness on their part that they are descendants of immigrants who have for a long time been removed from their ancestral land in China, who are now residing as British subjects in a country which became theirs by birth, and who have little in common with their British rulers apart from sharing the same language acquired through an English-medium education.

The Straits-born people appear to be drawn into the civilisation of the imperial centre, and seem keen to measure the backwardness or advancement of the diaspora as a whole in terms of the standards of colonial power. However, there is also an awareness that those standards are derived from an alien culture, and that the introduction of this culture is not intended to be a precursor for the replacement of their inherited Chinese culture, but rather as an adaptation of it. Reading the editorial address, the essay on the question of the queue, and the essay on dress and costume, it would be misleading to perceive the magazine as simply a mouthpiece for colonialism. On the contrary, what is clear from the narratives is that within the discourse of the colonial centre the subjectivity of the Straits-born Chinese is neither wholly subjugated nor completely devoid of agency. According to Holden, the implications of such patriotism for British sovereignty as displayed by the editors, and that which echoes the sentiments of the Straits-born community, can be read in two ways: 'as an accession to

colonialism', or as a 'precursor of liberal anti-colonial nationalism';¹⁴⁶ that which attempts to challenge and critique the colonial centre from within, and subvert the authority of the framework of power which presumes to dominate it.

The position of *The Straits-Chinese Magazine* can thus be seen as an ambivalent one in the sense that it is not clear whether the magazine is a discourse of cultural chauvinism or of anti-imperialist agenda. Lim himself admits at one point in the magazine that the Straits-borns' attitude towards Western civilisation 'has been most uncertain and arbitrary - not to say conflicting.'¹⁴⁷ The journal works at once to reject and reproduce the colonial discourse, and it is problematic to discern whether its writings were motivated by eurocentric concerns. For this reason, the narratives published within the magazine testify to an unresolved ambiguity of identity and loyalty among the Straits Chinese. Perhaps this ambiguity is part of the very process of this diasporic group's development in the colonial country, where the loyalty and opposition to the colonial government did not permit a clear-cut division within the community into the categories of collaborators or opponents of imperialism. Perhaps also in the nineteenth century diaspora, the Straits-born Chinese's impressions of imperialism, and indeed their sense of identity and cultural affiliation towards the colonising power, has always been ambiguous.

What seems clear is that while the advent of British colonial power was accompanied by a collective effort to "re-educate" the nation socially, and to transform the diaspora culturally, the Straits-born people did not do so simply by imitating the

¹⁴⁶ Philip Holden, *op. cit.*, p.86.

¹⁴⁷ Lim Boon Keng, 'Our Enemies', p.52.

colonial power. On the contrary, many of the essays reveal a sense of agency as the Straits Chinese are selective about what they take from the imperial culture. Even when they did adopt the modes of thought characteristic of the imperial centre, they did not adopt them in their entirety. Instead, the search on the part of the Straits-borns was for a regeneration of their inherited Chinese culture, but one that was in line with the requirements of technological progress brought about by colonialism. The writings in the magazine reveal an intention of this diasporic group to negotiate their subjectivity in the colonial discourse, as well as an identification with both an ancestral culture and its radical modern transformation. Taken together in their dialectical unity, the narratives enable us to show how the Straits-born Chinese succeed in producing a *different* diasporic identity, marked by an interlocking of political and intellectual forces.

The Final Issue of *The Straits-Chinese Magazine*.

This chapter has discussed the ways in which the identity of the Straits-born Chinese is constituted and constructed within *The Straits Chinese Magazine*. It is an identity that has not only moved away from China as the political centre, but one that challenges fixed or homogeneous definitions of “Chineseness”. Clearly, the vast and diverse literature of the magazine cannot be compressed in this chapter without some measure of simplification. However, without such a journal, the cultural and social constitution of the Straits-born Chinese may be reduced to an essentially abstract phenomenon.

The plurality of forms, voices, languages and perceptions that characterise *The Straits Chinese Magazine* reflects the need to come to terms with a community that has, for a long time, occupied a dominant position in relation to the rest of the diasporic community. The writings, both fiction and non-fiction alike, attest to a contentious discursive space from which the Straits-borns express a conflicting, albeit hybrid sense of identity and community. Together, the various forms of narratives published throughout the life of the magazine testify to a proliferation of literary material derived from nineteenth century Singapore, and more importantly, it provided for the Straits Chinese a cultural form of expression.

Yet, despite the wealth of literary and intellectual production amongst the Straits-born Chinese, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* had a short life span. Eleven years after the launch of its first edition, the magazine ceased publication. At the end of the third publication in 1907, in what was to become the journal's penultimate issue, the editors expressed their disappointment, and indeed despair, with the general lack of support needed to keep the magazine alive. They write:

Time and time again, in season and out of season, we have appealed to our readers generally and the Straits-born Chinese community in the Colony in particular to give our editorial staff their literary support and the manager their financial support. Our appeal has not met with that measure of success which we have a right to expect from our Straits Chinese people for whom this Magazine was primarily intended.¹⁴⁸

What is clear from the editor's address above is the want of financial, as well as 'literary support' that was needed to sustain the magazine. The disappointment that the editors felt is evident from their lamentation that their 'appeal has not met with that measure of success' which they had expected from the community. In fact, apart from

the founders of the magazine Lim and Song, and a small core of regular contributors such as Tan Tek Soon and Lew See Fah, there were hardly any other Straits-born Chinese individuals who contributed to the magazine. Literary production amongst the Straits-born Chinese, as Clammer suggests, 'remained mostly in the hands of the community leaders, and that was not enough to guarantee the success of any enterprise.'¹⁴⁹ However, despite its limited publication, that there exists such a magazine is monumental, not only because it presents an archive into which descendants of the diaspora can delve, but also because it recognises the diasporic subjects' claims to cultural identity and autonomy. As Holden suggests in his research on *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, the magazine's presence in nineteenth century Singapore marks 'a distinctive cultural space'¹⁵⁰ within the nation-state. It would seem clear from the discussion in this chapter that it is this very space that provides a contested site of discourse from which the identity of the early Straits-borns is constructed. In a diaspora of multiple and disconnected identities, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* is a meaningful attempt on the part of the Straits-born Chinese to find their place in history, with their own multi-layered and interlocking narratives, and to engage with their own contradictions and possibilities.

¹⁴⁸ 'The Editors' in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol.11 No.3, Sept. 1907, pp.125-126.

¹⁴⁹ John Clammer, *op. cit.*, p.74.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.86.

Chapter 4

Autobiography, Biography, and the China-born Chinese in *Chinese Jetsam on a Tropic Shore* by N.I. Low and *China Roots* by Mark Tan.

Chinese Jetsam (1974) and *China Roots* (1993) present two literary constructions of the China-born subject in the early diaspora. The former is an autobiography by the writer N.I. Low, and the latter a biography by Mark Tan, of his grandfather, Bheng Khay. I have chosen the two texts for the purposes of comparing two treatments of the diasporic experience by China-born *huaqiaos* and their descendants. The writers, Low and Tan, can each be seen as representing a generation of China-born Chinese whose works were written in the post-1950s era but set in the nineteenth century diaspora. Low is a first generation China-born Chinese of Fujianese ancestry, who was born in Foochow, China. He later migrated to Singapore at the age of nine, and was adopted by a Straits-born Chinese family. This background gave him the advantage of an education in both the Chinese vernacular and the English language. In *China Roots*, Tan has chosen to recreate biographically the Chinese diasporic experience through the eyes of his grandfather, Bheng Khay. Tan is a third generation China-born Chinese, and his grandfather arrived in Singapore at the age of 20 from the Hokkien province of China during the late nineteenth century. Like Low, Bheng Khay represents a pioneer generation of China-born immigrants who left China for Singapore during the period of the early diaspora, and who chose eventually to settle in the host country.

Against such backgrounds, both Low and Tan can be said to exemplify a generation of Chinese diasporic writers from Singapore whose writings reveal a

preoccupation not only with the autobiographical subject, but with the immigrant community of the nineteenth century, borne in part, and at once inspired by their connection to an inherited diasporic ancestry. Their paradoxical position as twentieth century writers writing about the early diaspora produces interesting insights into the diasporic community, and their narratives reflect a multifaceted perspective and construction of the nineteenth century Chinese community. The two texts, as we shall soon see, are enlightening in their depiction of the diasporic experience, as they illuminate the social and cultural context in which the diaspora was framed, demonstrating the ways in which literary writing and history have been interwoven in the construction of the early Chinese people.¹

Moreover, as works about the diaspora, the narratives focus on the early experiences of the Chinese people, and depict the difficulties associated with life in the immigrant community, where the protagonist in each case struggles to define and locate his identity in society. At the same time, as a genre or mode of writing, the publication of *Chinese Jetsam* and *China Roots* reveals a characteristic preoccupation in the production of Singaporean writing in English, and must be seen in its wider social and literary context. In Singapore, the emergence of a tradition of literary writing in English has been marked by a proliferation of the autobiographical and biographical genres. I propose two reasons for this apparent development. For one, the

¹ My reading of the two texts here is also informed by Graham Huggan's notion of the 'anthropological exotic'. Speaking in the context of African literature, Huggan warns that there is a danger in reading ethnic texts as simply 'a more or less transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific ... African world.' (p.37) Such an 'anthropological' approach to African writings, according to Huggan, will only serve to reinforce the assumption of literature as a mere reproduction of reality. See Graham Huggan, *The Post-colonial Exotic*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001. Within this context, it must be emphasised that my analysis of *Chinese Jetsam* and *China Roots* here, is not simply to provide an ethnographic reading of the early diaspora, but to afford an understanding,

very act of life-writing, perhaps more than any other literary form, purports to offer a certain degree of “credibility”,² where the narrator is himself or herself participant in the life story being recorded. The attraction of such a genre, thus lies in part, in its propensity to “authenticate” the life narrated, where the employment of the autobiographical or biographical form provides a useful apparatus for the articulation of a “lived” and personal experience. For another, the practice of autobiographical and biographical writing in Singapore, in particular by writers of Chinese origin, may also have something to do with the very status of the genre in the history of Chinese literature. Shao Dongfang reveals that there has long been in Chinese society, a tradition of biographical and autobiographical writing.³ This is evident particularly during the twentieth century, where ‘Chinese life-writing matured into a distinct literary form’, typified by eminent works such as the biography of *Xu Yisun* (1919), *Cui Shu de Nianpu* (the biography of Zhang Xuechang) (1922), *Shen Congwen Zizhuan* (the autobiography of Shen Congwen) (1932), *Wushi huiyi* (Memoir at the Age of Fifty) (1946) by Huang Shaohong, and more recently the biography of *Zhou Zuoren* (1991) by Qian Liqun and the autobiography of Shen Congwen (1992). According to Shao, the writing of Chinese life-stories continues even to the present, and the appeal of such a literary genre lies in the firm belief, shared by both writers and readers alike, that the task of biographers and autobiographers is to ‘make order out of chaos’, and

in autobiographical and biographical form, of the social and historical complexities, and indeed ambiguities, in which the early diasporic society was formed.

² It must be noted here that while the autobiographical and biographical narrative purports to give a certain degree of credibility to the life-story narrated, the very genre also makes it suspect; where the obverse side to such personal writing is at times distorted by the subjectivity and unreliability of the autobiographer’s memory. The employment of autobiographical and biographical writing has thus far-reaching implications, and the hegemonising social and literary forces which inhere in the representations of such so-called “authentic” and “real” personal experiences will be discussed in the following section.

³ Shao Dongfang, *Transformation, Diversification, Ideology: Twentieth-Century Chinese Biography*, trans. by Du Xiaoya, Singapore: *Lianhe Zaobo*, 1997, p.19.

to search for the “character of the Chinese spirit”.⁴ The significance of such a paradigm seems to lie in the responsibility of the writer to discover the constitution of the Chinese “self”, as portrayed in the autobiography or biography, and Chinese authors in general, Shao asserts, have been motivated by such a moral obligation. Within such a context, the writing and publication of life-stories in China thus gained resonance, and have contributed significantly to the history of Chinese literature, as both established and lesser known authors alike continue ‘to explore the frontiers’ of such literary forms.⁵

It is thus probable that the popularisation of life-writing as a literary genre in Chinese literature has had an influence on the literary scene of its diaspora, where a prevalent form of writing for writers in Singapore during the same period has likewise been autobiography and biography. Koh Tai Ann traces the development of Singaporean writing in English with its emergence in the twentieth century, and according to her, life-writing as a narrative form tended to predominate.⁶ These works of memoirs, she suggests, ‘trace either the subject’s life or the biographer’s own back to grandfather’s or great-grandfather’s, they virtually cover the period of the height of

⁴ *ibid*, p.32.

⁵ *ibid*.

⁶ See Koh Tai Ann, ‘Biographical and Literary Writings and Plays in English by Women from Malaysia and Singapore: A Checklist’, *Commentary* 7: 2 & 3, December 1897. According to Koh, the genre of life-writing has also been a predominant narrative form for women writers in Songapore, beginning from a pioneer generation of Chinese female in Singapore who began writing in the late 1950s. Some of these early female writers and their works include for instance, *Sold for Silver* (1958) an autobiography of a former bondsmaid by Janet Lim, *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (1975) by Ruth Ho, *The Patriarch* (1975) by Yeap Joo Kim, and *Memories of a Nonya* (1981) by Queeny Chang. These writings take the form of biography or autobiography and all have as their central concern, the life of the Chinese female immigrant. Shirley Lim has also provided a comprehensive account of the tradition of Women writings in Singapore and Malaysia. She discusses not only women’s writing in prose, but in poetry. For more on the subject read Shirley Geok-lin Lim, ‘The National Canon and English-language Women Writers from Malaysia and Singapore, 1949-1969’ in *Writing South East/Asia in English*, pp.158-198.

Chinese settlement in this part of the world.’⁷ Amongst the examples which Koh alludes to in her essay, narratives such as *Chinese Jetsam* and *China Roots* by the Singaporean writers N.I. Low and Mark Tan share common ground in that they take the form of biography or autobiography, and all have as their central concern, the life of the Chinese immigrant. Furthermore, the very idea of autobiography, as an expression of personal experience, also inevitably involves discussing a sense of “the past”, and to this extent, the writing of *Chinese Jetsam* and *China Roots*, like that of the tradition of life-writings from China, represent the works of Chinese writers from Singapore who take it as their duty to write about the diaspora, and simultaneously to recover and define the character and constitution of the diasporic Chinese subject.

The main focus of this chapter then, is to explore how *Chinese Jetsam* and *China Roots* construct and recreate the early diaspora, through the use of particular diasporic spaces. In doing so, the chapter seeks to raise several interrelated theoretical issues. First, it poses the question of how the China-born protagonists are located in autobiography and biography, looking in particular at the narrative’s use of topography, space, and geography. I argue that the life experiences of Low and Bheng Khay are consistently associated with the possibility of change, migration and movement, where the use of spatial and cartographic representations in the narratives reveal the ways in which the diasporic subject takes “possession” of the homeland, both imaginatively and materially. It seems that for both protagonists, the writing up of their life-stories is a way of “re-locating” themselves in their homeland in China. The texts feed the geographical and diasporic imagination of the readers, who become embroiled in the cartographical and pictorial images of home and away. Yet, ironically,

⁷ *ibid.*, p.254.

through the recreation of the protagonists' life accounts, the use of these structuring devices also questions the very genre of autobiography, and problematises the reality of the diasporic experience itself; normalising but at the same time challenging the authority of the diasporic narration.

Secondly, while the autobiographies of Low and Bheng Khay can be read in terms of their spatial and visual representations, I also argue that they can be perceived in terms of the way they “map” constructions of identity and belonging. In the following pages, I will show how *diasporic identities have been, and continue to be*, spatially constituted; how Low and Bheng Khay relate to the notion of a Chinese cultural identity as *huaqiaos*, that is to say, an identity that is tied to membership in the nation-state of China. Using the discussion in Chapter Two as a point of departure, I examine the ways in which *Chinese Jetsam* and *China Roots* are constructions of how a China-born Chinese identity is negotiated in diaspora, as the texts reveal the protagonists deriving a sense of belonging and identity from their migratory experience. I argue that the kind of identity and self that each subject imagines in relation to its *jia xiang* (homeland),⁸ and the kind of identity it projects in the diaspora are different. This is reflected through the central characters who embody the inner conflicts and tensions brought about by the confrontation between their sense of ethnicity in both their *jia xiang* (or imagined *jia xiang*) and the diaspora.

⁸ For the definition and significance of *jia xiang* read Chapter Two.

Topographies of Place and Memory: Locating the China-born Chinese Subject in *Chinese Jetsam*.

Chinese Jetsam is striking in the way that it is vividly imbued with a sense of place, and the aim of the next two sections is to explore the ways in which the diasporic subject imaginatively and materially “possesses” the homeland, through the use of topography and geography. I argue here that the spatiality of the diaspora’s native land does not merely describe a material or geographical space, but represents, at times, a metaphorical space of place and memory. The discussion reveals how the diasporic experience of the China-born Chinese is spatially constituted, looking in particular at the role of the autobiographer and narrator in the narrative. It discusses the extent to which the paradoxical use of memory in the narrative problematises the construction of the diasporic experience, before further examining how the text relates to the question of a Chinese cultural identity.

Chinese Jetsam is an interesting attempt on the part of the narrator to negotiate a viable representation of the diasporic “self”, in relation to the spatial discourse of its natal territory in China. The narrative can be read in part as an attempt to explicate the culture and early experiences of Low in his village. It appears to address members of Low’s own community as well as a wider group who is perhaps confronted with the limits of their cultural knowledge of the place. Thus, the first impression of the narrative is the sense of the homeland as a trope and cultural space that figures prominently in the text, where at least the first ten chapters of Low’s autobiography is devoted to his early life in the ‘[h]amlet of the Lows of the Peach Grove’.⁹ The narrative begins by exploring and imaginatively describing Low’s hamlet, and what the

narrator observes is a community steeped in the traditional ways of life in ‘ancient China’.¹⁰ The autobiography opens with a description of family life in the hamlet: the communal meals, family disagreements, the poverty, and the hunger. In the geographical and cultural space of his homeland, Low describes a ‘poverty-stricken community’ where burial-plots are scarce and ‘money hard to come by’,¹¹ and his account of the province is punctuated with description and reflection of what he remembers about life in the hamlet and in the feudal economy. As he recalls, ‘we were fated to do all the work, while our landlords enjoyed half the produce of the fields.’¹² The narrative also provides details of Chinese traditions in the village. There are descriptions of the ‘Dragon Boat Festival’,¹³ ‘rites of ancestral worship’,¹⁴ preparation of unusual foods such as ‘potato- rice’¹⁵ and ‘dried bamboo shoots’,¹⁶ and of elaborate funeral practices. As the narrator, Low adopts the narrative stance of a cultural guide, and provides the reader with a tour of his native Chinese community. In doing so, he tells an elaborate story of village life, and positions the reader within a narrowly defined spatial location of his homeland.

“Home”, as Dorinne Kondo suggests, is something which ‘we cannot not want’,¹⁷ and the “home” often, especially for ‘people on the margins’ such as those in diaspora, signifies a ‘safe place’ and for ‘community’.¹⁸ Following Kondo’s argument,

⁹ N.I. Low, *Chinese Jetsam on a Tropic Shore*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1974, p.1.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.5.

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp.2-3.

¹² *ibid.*, p.2.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.1.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.23.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.27.

¹⁷ Dorinne Kondo, ‘The Narrative Production of “Home,” Community, and Political Identity in Asian American Theater’ in Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.97.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

it is evident that the diasporic discourse of the “home” is mediated through Low’s autobiography. Even at the outset of the text, the motif of the “home” and his memories of it, take precedence. For instance, Low “takes possession” of his homeland and personalises the hamlet. He achieves this through the immediacy of his own experiences, where the homeland is not just a geographical fantasy which Low recreates within the autobiography, but one that is “real” and associated with intimate experiences which apparently only the autobiographer has knowledge of. In a personal voice, Low fills the text with segments of information on what he remembers about his home-life. As he recalls, ‘[o]n waking up in the morning, I found waiting for me a bowl of white rice-noodles, steaming hot, and wonder of wonders, two hard-boiled duck’s eggs, ...’.¹⁹ The passage enacts Low’s experiences of his boyhood in China, where he associates the familiarity of his home with waking up in the morning and having his bowl of ‘steaming hot’, ‘white rice-noodles’ and ‘hard-boiled duck’s eggs’. It could perhaps be said that the “home” here represents the security, safety, and warmth that the protagonist feels within the domestic confines of his family and household.

At the same time, the notion of “home”, for Low, is also a socio-culturally specific locality where violence or prejudice against fellow members of the community can occur. This is demonstrated, for instance, when he questions the very culture and community he is striving to depict. Mid-way in his exposition of the village and community, he presents an account of one of his male cousins, whose plight within the community leads Low to question the very values he was brought up to believe. The cousin remains nameless and this implies his lack of identity in the community. The

¹⁹ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.2.

male relative is labelled 'a lusty bachelor'²⁰ and persecuted by the villagers for his promiscuous lifestyle. Low reconstructs his cousin's experience of being physically tortured by members of a rival village, '[t]hey made him run the gauntlet, and after forcing human excrement down his throat, they let him go. He made his way home, vomiting blood, to await death's slow release.'²¹ Thus, the community and spatiality of the "home", as it is depicted here, can also be an unsafe and dangerous place, as the autobiography is underwritten by an alternative text of male vulnerability and victimisation. As Low elaborates the story of his cousin, he creates a portrait of his community as at once powerless and unforgiving in their failure to avenge the death of the cousin. He reveals a side of the village that is most likely imperceptible to outsiders. As he says, '[t]he Lows of the Hamlet of the Peach Grove' had neither the means nor the spirit to start a blood-feud, and my cousin died unavenged.'²² The "home" in the hamlet, as Low describes it, is therefore a special and, at times, menacing place. It is also one that is culturally specific, and one that he is most well-versed in.

The spatial discourse and narrative of Low's autobiography is thus clearly centred on his natal land, and on his place in the homeland. According to Linda Warley in her study of postcolonial theories of autobiography, literary texts are always deeply rooted in specific places and histories, and spatial location in particular is crucial to the 'postcolonial autobiographical representation'.²³ This is because the forgetting of the 'locatedness of the subject' - that is, the spatial and geographic location of the

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.3.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Linda Warley, 'Locating the Subject of Post-Colonial Autobiography' in *Kunapipi*, Vol. 15 No.1, 1993, p.23.

autobiographical 'I', suggests 'an imperialist assumption of the centrality of the postcolonial subject that has never been possible for the post-colonial writer.' As such, the enterprise of many postcolonial autobiographical projects, Warley writes, has been to personalise, (re)territorialise, and localise the positioning of the autobiographical subject. This is evident in the discourse of *Chinese Jetsam*, where everything Low depicts and everywhere he goes, is a comment on his home, his family, and his *jia xiang* in China, as it was and as he remembers it to be. In the process of 'locating' the autobiographical "I", it would appear that Low's autobiographical text comprises two levels. On a more obvious level, it involves his personal experiences in the hamlet, but on a more subtle level, it also recounts the collective experience of his family, home country, and China-born people. In other words, by recreating and constructing his homeland, the significance of Low's autobiography lies both in the personal account of his life and in the historical account of the China-born immigrants.²⁴ As narrator, Low seeks to interrogate the history of his Chinese people within his autobiography. He engages with two sets of stories: that of his community and that of his own life. In the

²⁴Autobiography, by its very nature, is based on a pre-occupation with the self. At the same time, it is inherently historical, reflecting the wider concerns of the society and culture in question. As James Olney has written, '[i]f autobiography is in one sense history, then one can turn that around and say that history is also autobiography' (p.36). James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The meaning of Autobiography*, Princeton University Press, 1972. Various theorists have accounted for the complex relationship between history and autobiography and have argued that history is a form of narrative discourse (Hans Kellner, Roland Barthes, and Iain Chambers in Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997). Kellner perceives historical discourses as 'part of a story, an explicit or implicit narrative' (p.127), while Barthes argues that the historian is 'not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers' (p.121). Along similar lines, Chambers asserts that '[h]istory comes to us not as raw, bleeding facts but in textual reproduction, in narratives woven by desire (for truth) and a will (for power). [...] For it deals with a memory that knows the impossibility of ever fully knowing either itself or the past. What are transcribed and translated are traces, residues, shadows, and echoes' (*ibid.*, p.81). The hegemonic conception of historical and autobiographical discourses which Chambers has outlined above have a profound influence on the way that narratives are produced. History and autobiography, as forms of discourses, are products of a particular set of power and knowledge relations (or as Chambers suggests, a product of desire and will). The work of historians and autobiographers creates the forms within which the history of an individual or a community could appear. In this sense, history does not merely contain a single meaning, but, depending on the context and power relations, can take on multiple meanings and interpretations.

process, he assumes different subject-positions and different identities. For instance, as he attempts to relate to his community, his autobiographical self becomes the embodiment of his community's self. The autobiographical 'I' in the narrative shifts back and forth to a collective 'we':

I did not know then, and years passed before *I* came to know of the idea, ... It is a libel to say that *we* in China had only three baths in our life-time; once at birth, once on the eve of our marriage, and once when *we* are about to go into our coffins. ... If a bath means only one of these two things, then *I* must confess *I* never had a single bath in the years *I* spent in China.²⁵

The 'I's and 'we's oscillate with the narrator's changing subject-position. As the autobiographical 'I' shifts to a collective 'we', it seems as if the life depicted in the narrative is representative of life in China of a certain period or social milieu. In the particular passage above, Low speaks of the significance of baths as a ritual in ancient China, where people 'had only three baths', once at every stage in their lives: at birth, before marriage, and finally at death. Later in the narrative, Low goes on to elaborate on life in the village, and his personal experiences as a boy in the hamlet. He speaks of having to peel off the 'paper-thin layers of black dirt from my arms' as a result of not having had enough baths, of the 'coarse linen and cotton clothes' that he constantly had to wear as a child, and of the 'thick matting of dried rice-stalks' that he used as a bed.²⁶ Low elaborates on his own biography, speaking also of his private ambitions as a boy where he says, 'I remember I would one day become a teacher', and remembers the intimate times spent with his family, where he recalls 'sitting with my grown-up cousins around a heap of rice-husks'. Yet, at the same time as Low recounts his life-

²⁵ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.12.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.13.

story, he speaks simultaneously of the life-story of his community, describing the way they 'were too poor to have more than one suit', and how 'our beds became too verminous for comfort'.²⁷ Thus, in recounting his personal experiences, what is also apparent is that Low simultaneously sees his life-story as part of the collective story of the community. He becomes so engrossed with the history and lives of his China-born people that the boundaries between the narrative as an autobiography of his own life and the narrative as a history of his native province begin to break down. If, as Janet Gunn has argued, autobiography is not conceived as "the private act of self-writing" but as "the cultural act of a self-reading", then the issue in autobiographical discourse is not simply a question of the subject's autobiographical "I", but a question of the subject's position and location in the world, in history, and in the diasporic culture which he is trying to portray.²⁸ Low, in his autobiography, is more than just a narrator and autobiographer. He is simultaneously, a cultural representative or spokesman for his people; a self that adopts a collective voice on behalf of the Chinese community and performs the function of explicating the system of his Chinese culture. He also becomes a self that enlightens the ignorant about the social truths of his culture. Low speaks from the privileged position of advocate for his village, thereby allowing himself the possibility of identifying with his culture. If one conceives of the diasporic self as a circle, then the "self", as constructed in *Chinese Jetsam*, is never presented as a completed, but as that which is constantly evolving and completing.

As autobiographer, what is also significant is the way in which Low simultaneously problematises the reality of his early experiences in the *jia xiang*, and

²⁷ *ibid.*

later in the diaspora. While it is self-evident that he shapes the narrative with his memories, it must be nevertheless be said that remembering the past is subjective, and relying on memory challenges the accuracy of the autobiography and of the historical events. For instance, Low's memories of the family house feature prominently within the text, for it is one of the key sites from which he constructs his sense of identity. The family house is an important trope in the autobiography as Low draws our attention to his remembered childhood house and uncovers his memories of the household:

Our family house had two courtyards, separated one from the other by the main house, which had two storeys. Downstairs was the reception hall, with a wooden partition at the back, a door to the right and another to the left. Behind the partition was a smaller hall, with a room on each side of it.²⁹

The first impression is the sense of space, both physical and psychological. The text is bound up with details about the layout of the house, as it takes us through each specific courtyard, hall, and partition. The narrative is precise in the way that it marks off each space, and distinguishes between the internal and external space of the house. It would seem as if the narrator seeks to locate the diasporic subject within a spatial and geographic location of the family house in an attempt, perhaps, to enhance the "authenticity" of the home. Low remembers every architectural feature of the house - the 'two courtyards', the 'reception hall', the 'smaller hall', and the 'room on each side of it', and they all suggest that the family house is still a familiar and "real" place to him.

²⁸Janet Gunn, *Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

²⁹ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, pp.2-3.

Spatial location, as Warley writes, 'also has meaning at the micro level'.³⁰ According to her, 'spaces "speak" ', and they can be perceived as having coded, significance. For Low every room, partition, courtyard, and hall in the house holds a specific meaning. For instance, the absence of a room for his father, is symbolic of the fact that his father 'was seldom home.'³¹ On the other hand, the rooms upstairs that were never lived in but were used as storing-places for the produce of the fields, allude to the fact that the community is self-sufficient. The rooms filled with produce 'to keep [them] warm in winter'³² testify to the clan's achievements, resilience, and their working-class, peasant ancestry. If, following Warley, that 'spaces speak', then what the spaces of Low's text articulate is that family house can also be a taboo and threatening place. The communal latrine of the house, for instance, is a constant source of fear for the protagonist as a young boy. The latrine is a large projection jutting out over an enormous wooden vat from one of the four walls surrounding the house, and as Low recalls, 'I remember shuddering at the picture of myself falling into the vat and bobbing up and down in it.'³³ Thus, the family house, with its specific spaces and meanings, occupies a central position in Low's life. This special, self-contained world of the family house is also the one in which he consciously inscribes himself. He must, as he asserts, 'pull [him]self back to the family-house, to see the main body of the house.'³⁴ As he describes and names each space within it, Low takes possession of the house and claims it as his own personal territory. It is a "home" that he comfortably occupies because he "fits", and therefore one that he 'pulls [himself] back to'. The

³⁰ Linda Warley, *op. cit.*, p.25.

³¹ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.3.

³² *ibid.*, p.4.

³³ *ibid.*, p.6.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p.4.

narrative, in which case, can be perceived as one of “return” and reunion with the homeland, and the family house serves as a metaphor of his connection to the village. The representation of the house, and the images of Low’s loved ones within it, are recurring symbols of his nostalgic return to the past. The spatiality of the house becomes a territorial marker and, as Helen Tiffin suggests, is a ‘figure of indigenisation’,³⁵ for the homeless diasporic migrant.

Thus, through the use of topography and spatiality, Low defines, “possesses”, and recreates the boyhood memories of his family house and village. The territory of the hamlet is reproduced, making a strong impression on the geographical imagination of the reader. In the process, readers become absorbed in the world of Low’s childhood, as topographical representations reflect and reinforce, to some extent, the realism of his written text. At the same time, however, it is also significant that Low’s memories are a critical source of knowledge, for it is these very memories which ultimately problematise, and indeed challenge, the “reality” of his biography and topographical representations. On the surface at least, what Low remembers about the house, and undoubtedly about his life in the village, is thought to communicate some essential “truth” about his past, and indeed, to present an “authentic” account of his life. The narrative is punctuated with repeated sentences that begin with ‘I remember ...’, and ‘One of my earliest memories ...’, and all these suggest that such memories vicariously and nostalgically transfer Low to his childhood, to his past, and to the “good old times” in the community village. However, even as Low draws on his recollections to provide a convincing picture of his past, they also play a dual role as

³⁵ Helen Tiffin, ‘New Concepts of Person and Place in The Twyborn Affair and A Bend in the River’ in *A Sense of Place in the New Literatures in English* in Peggy Nightingale (ed.), St. Lucia:

they simultaneously work to discredit the present. Even though he is located within a physical, “geographic” location, and the autobiography purports to be a true testimony of his personal experiences, the reader is nonetheless displaced by Low’s own memories of situations or places in the past which he does or does not remember:

I remember being told the silliest of the silly *Twenty-four Tales of Filial Piety*, the one in which a boy is said to have made a point of climbing into bed in winter every night long before his parents, so as to warm up the bed for them. I do not remember who told me the story.³⁶

Here, as the autobiographer, Low determines what his readers know of the past. He uses memory to demarcate the boundaries of what his readers understand about his childhood. Gillian Cohen argues that there is ‘variability both in terms of quantity and quality’ in the use of memory in autobiographical writing in the sense that ‘when people look back over their lives, memories from some parts of the life space are more readily available than from other parts.’³⁷ The above passage is clearly evidence of Cohen’s assertion of the ‘variability’ of memory. At the beginning of the narrative, Low recalls being told stories about filial piety, as he says: ‘I remember being told the silliest ...’. However, the story comes to an abrupt close when he claims he does not remember who told him the story: ‘I do not remember ...’. By alternating the narrative

University of Queensland Press, 1986, p.23 cited in Linda Waverly, *op. cit.*, p.26.

³⁶ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.13.

³⁷ Gillian Cohen, ‘Memory for Personal Experiences: Autobiographical Memory’ in *Memory in the Real World*, United Kingdom: Psychology Press, p.157. In this chapter on ‘Memory for Personal Experiences’ Cohen provides a detailed discussion of the function, organisation, and structure of autobiographical memory. The chapter also discusses different theoretical ideas and models that have been developed in relation to the use of memory in autobiographical writing. See Gillian Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp.137-177. For more on the subject of autobiographical memory see also John A Robinson, ‘Autobiographical Memory’ in Michael Gruneberg and Peter Morris (eds.), *Aspects of Memory Volume 1: The Practical Aspects*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992 (first published 1978), pp.223-250. In this chapter, Robinson provides a theoretical and empirical study of the workings of memory in autobiography, and looks at different aspects of memory such as ‘forgetting’, childhood memory, and the organisation of autobiographical memory.

between excerpts of the past he remembers and does not remember, Low assumes the power to at once involve and isolate his readers from his childhood. More aptly, he problematises the act of narrative recall and signals to his readers the pitfalls of recollection. Two other instances in the narrative also illustrate Low's attempts to manipulate his memories of the past. Recalling an incident in childhood in which he provoked a reprimand from the preacher, Miss Tolley, about his inattentiveness in church and bible study, he writes: '[o]ne painful memory of a slightly earlier time has been trying to bury itself in the unconscious. I must pull it up by main force and by facing it, rob it of its power to hurt.'³⁸ Later in the text, he asserts his need to "resurrect" particular memories, especially those he deems painful, '[p]ainful memories are like moles burrowing into the ground. They have to be ruthlessly dug up.'³⁹ In both instances, Low deliberately retrieves his memory and relives the past, in order to face his emotional trauma.

What the narrative suggests is therefore the extent to which memory is exercised or controlled by Low himself as the autobiographer. He interprets past experiences to fit his own needs and desires. On the other hand, what the narrative may also suggest is that Low's memory is out of his control, and this accounts for the past which he cannot remember. This is evident in the narrative where, as much of the subject's repressed past eventually returns to its present reality, just as much of the past remains repressed. This is demonstrated by omissions in the narrative about past events which Low does not remember or appears to forget. One argument for this apparent repression of the past, I propose, is an intentional manipulation and control of

³⁸ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.91.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.92.

memories on the part of Low to produce a sort of enigma for his autobiography, within the confines of secrecy: 'I have no memory of myself romping with other children. I must have been a very unattractive child, a child that other children did not take to.'⁴⁰ Here, instead of 'recreating' the past in the present as most writers purport to do in their autobiographies, Low claims the inability to recall events. He chooses to conceal or avoid his past, and the repeated 'I have no memory ...' or 'I do not remember ...' unmistakably suggests a sense of loss. Low's inability to remember certain events remains unresolved, and his forgetting reflects the dissonance and fractures within the narrative of the text.

It is also apparent that the subject in *Chinese Jetsam*, can aid or hinder remembering. In some instances, Low can aid the production of memories into the present, as I have illustrated above. Yet, in other instances, he is perceived to deliberately withhold or rather suppress particular pieces of information about his past, especially aspects of the past which he sees as painful or unpleasant and therefore refuses to confront, '[t]here goes a hateful memory frantically burrowing into the unconscious to escape scrutiny.'⁴¹ In this instance, Low's memories are not repressed in the Freudian sense of an unconsciously motivated non-recollection, but a deliberate, conscious form of forgetting. It is almost as if he is deliberately amnesiac. Given this, Low is then also, the censor of his autobiography, concealing events of which he does not want his readers to know. Yet, whether Low's memory recall is with or without conscious awareness, what does seem clear is the fact that his inability to remember certain incidents of the past is simply an indication of how far removed from native life

⁴⁰ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.42.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.109.

he, as an adult, has become. Low's narrative is the product of what he remembers of his childhood, and the loss of what he ceases to remember, and this is reflected throughout the autobiography where he only remembers and recounts particular characteristics or incidents about life in his village.

Thus, despite the insistence of Low, as the autobiographical subject, to construct a narrative that represents a true and verifiable story of its diasporic experience, in particular through the construction of space and topography, the fallibility of memory is nonetheless discernible because the selectivity inherent in the narrative is all too apparent. Granted, the past cannot be recaptured in its totality and the human mind is fallible, it nonetheless raises the possibility that Low, as autobiographer and narrator, is in effect consciously being selective about the choice of events or incidents he wants to remember and record in his autobiography. At the same time, the very use of memory and its peculiar operation, bringing back some things and at other times neglecting other things as we have seen in the narrative, seems to suggest that the spatiality of the homeland need not necessarily be a material one, but it may also be a metaphorical and imaginative one. What it also suggests, to that extent, is that the notion of a diasporic self, is not continuous, for it brings up one self here and another self there, and these selves are not the same as one another.

“Mapping” the Diaspora: Locating the China-born Chinese in *China Roots*.

Like *Chinese Jetsam*, the diasporic experience in *China Roots* is imagined in spatial and visual representations. The narrative begins by charting material and

metaphorical spaces in which the diaspora's homeland and the diasporic experience are recreated. If constructions of "memory" and topography are Low's strategies of recreating his diasporic experience in *Chinese Jetsam*, then cartographic and pictorial representations are means by which the narrator of *China Roots* constructs Bheng Khay's past. One of the most distinctive and recurring motifs of the biography is the 'mapping' of the diaspora. The previous section has shown that the post-colonial autobiographer is engaged in a project of "possessing" the place, as an act of opposition to the invasion of both territory and mind enacted by Europe upon colonial space. Much like the post-colonial subject, the diasporic subject here also tends to situate himself or herself within a "geographic" location since the diaspora itself is historically constructed as peripheral.

In the case of *China Roots*, the "geographical" positioning of the diasporic subject is constructed through the trope of maps and mapping. A sketch map of Bheng Khay's native village in the Hokkien province is provided at the beginning of the narrative as a point of reference for readers.⁴² The first impression of the map is the sense of it being hand-drawn, with few formal cartographic symbols and minimal details. It is without scientific precision, and each province and village on the map is demarcated by a series of perforated and uneven boundaries. The Ann Koay Prefecture from where the protagonist originates, for instance, is marked by a perforated circle. The village of Hong Lai is then demarcated by a marked dot within the circle. Amoy, where most of the China-born immigrants came from, is positioned roughly at the bottom of the picture, while the village of Hock Chew is somewhere at the top.

⁴² Mark Tan, *China Roots*, Singapore: Angsana Books, 1993, p.13. The map is reproduced in Appendix 5.

The minimal details on the map suggest that the text makes no attempt to represent the landscape accurately. The map is sketched, and there is no key to guide the reader. Yet, I argue that the significance of the map lies not so much in its topographical accuracy but in what it represents. The map, in this sense, does not merely describe a material space, but it represents also, a metaphorical and imaginative space. What it signifies, more specifically, is a cartographic image of the diaspora's homeland. Graham Huggan has written about the use of the map as a cartographic representation in contemporary Canadian and Australian literatures. According to him, the 'diversity of functions served by the map metaphor ... suggests a desire on the part of their respective writers not merely to deterritorialise, but also to reterritorialise, their increasingly multiform cultures.'⁴³ By 'deterritorialise' and 'reterritorialise' here, Huggan means to interpret the map not simply as a means of 'spatial containment or systematic organisation', but as a form of 'spatial perception', which takes into account the reformulation of links both within and between cultures.⁴⁴ Huggan's argument of the textual production of maps is relevant not only in the context of Canadian and Australian literatures, but also in the writing of *China Roots*, where the map can be seen as a means of textualising the connection between the diasporic subject; in this case, Bheng Khay and the homeland. In this context, the hand-drawn map suggests that it is a personal document, much like a birth certificate, for instance, which can be possessed and kept. In addition, although the topography is not precise, the device of the map helps to create an illusion of territory and place for the reader. "China", as constructed in the discourse of the map, takes on a geographical identity as

⁴³ Graham Huggan, 'Decolonising the Map' in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, *op. cit.*, p.408.

a geopolitical nation state. The map becomes a sign of “territory”, a visual analogue of the diaspora’s homeland where identity and belonging are spatially constituted. As a graphical representation of the homeland, it also produces a degree of geographical “reality” in the biography. The reality of Bheng Khay’s homeland and diasporic experience is illustrated, reiterated, and reinforced through the map. In this sense, the authority of the map lies in its ability to reinforce and legitimate the status quo of the autobiography, and in its propensity to authenticate the diasporic experience. It is also a metaphor and visual paradigm of the diaspora’s journey; of its crossing of physical and/or conceptual boundaries. It is a representation of a stretch of space and time for the diasporic subject, to give meaning and perspective to its life and the rest of the China-born people. The metaphor of the map as a “cartographic connection” can therefore be considered to provide that provisional link between Bheng Khay and his homeland.

Vijay Mishra speaks of an ‘imaginary homeland’ that is constructed by the diasporic subject from the space of a distance, in order to compensate for a loss occasioned by migration.⁴⁵ Thus, while Mishra’s subject creates an imaginary homeland, the diasporic subject in this case “territorialises” it. By this I mean to project and re-create the imagined homeland into cartographic form, so that the ‘diasporic imaginary’ is replaced by the idea of a natal territory that is always visible and tangible through the form of the map. The homeland becomes a spatial and “physical” geographical location, or, in my coinage, a “physiorepresentational” construct. The names of the various villages and provinces on the map, written one after the other in

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.*, p.424.

the Hokkien dialect, also set out graphically the spatial landscape of Bheng Khay's homeland. Such place names act as points of references for the reader, where the significance of the map is almost otherwise inaccessible. The narrator writes at the end of the text, it is a 'map of Hokkien Province as Bheng Khay knew it'.⁴⁶ The act of naming and mapping serves, in this case, to accentuate the protagonist's "territorial" ambitions: his desire to place and "fix" his homeland within a narrowly defined and demarcated cartographic space. Presumably then, this is a map of the same landscape as depicted later in the biography. It is the all important landscape in which the protagonist has lived half his life. Hence, the sketch map, as a trope, suggests an attempt on the part of the text to re-establish a diasporic connection as close to the diaspora's traditional "territory" as it is possible. At the same time, it also provides a degree of "reality" and indeed "truthfulness" to Bheng Khay's homeland and diasporic experience.

The packaging of the text itself is also an attempt to construct and stress the authenticity of the subject's diasporic experience. The narrator relies heavily on narrative strategies not only in the form of conceptual maps, but in the form of family stories and photographs. Memories of places and events of immigrant life are encapsulated in photographs and included in the narrative.⁴⁷ They depict, for instance, the 'lodging house'⁴⁸ where Bheng Khay supposedly lived upon his arrival in the diaspora. There are also pictures of shophouses which were used to accommodate migrant labourers, as well as a picture of Bheng Khay himself.⁴⁹ The photographs

⁴⁶ Mark Tan, *op. cit.*, p.13. See Appendix 5.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.55. See Appendix 6.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, See Appendix 7.

document the history of Bheng Khay's life and that of his fellow Chinese immigrants, and their effect on the readers is pervasive. The photos are the closest one can get to reproducing the life of the China-born individual in the diasporic community. Photographs, as mimetic representations of immigrant life and indeed of the diasporic subject's own life, reinforce the narrator's authority of reality over the living past. They assume some intellectual authority, as the reader becomes absorbed in the world of the diasporic subject, embroiled in the visual and pictorial images of the diaspora. In the case of *China Roots*, the photographs not only depict the images of the protagonist's life, but they appear to romanticise it. The faded and blurry edges of the pictures draw attention to the bygone days, thus highlighting the ways in which the text colludes in constructing as well as reflecting the life of the diasporic migrant.

It can thus be said that the past, as constructed in *China Roots*, is turned into a series of nostalgic objects. It is transformed into what can perhaps be described as fetish-souvenirs that are displayed and consumed repeatedly. Photographs, maps, and mapping are some of the nostalgic objects that are circulated in the biography. At the same time, the photographic and cartographic representations, and the narrative in which they are embedded, also provide an interesting example of the narrator's attempt to authenticate and verify the diasporic subject's past. It seems this attempt to represent the life of the Chinese migrant must convince readers of the truthfulness of the migrant's diasporic experience; that the biographical account of the narrator's grandfather is indeed an honest account of the protagonist's life in the diaspora. When told and reproduced according to such formulae, the "lived" experience of the diasporic protagonist becomes authenticated, and seems inevitably tied to issues of commerce and commodification. As Graham Huggan suggests, the literary genre of

autobiography is at times complicit in the deployment of ‘cultural authenticity’ as a marketing tool within the publishing industry. The packaging of particular Aboriginal life-stories for example, is committed to the interpellation of a ‘globalised market reader’, where the texts themselves, as Huggan writes, demonstrate ‘an awareness of the implications of [their] own commercial packaging’.⁵⁰ Thus, just as autobiographical discourses purport to be the source of absolute “truth” and the ultimate representation of reality, the biographical text such as *China Roots* also lays claim to its authenticity.⁵¹ This is reinforced through the narrative structure of the text. For instance, the detailed exploration of the circumstances of Bheng Khay’s emigration from China to the diaspora can be seen as an attempt to place the narrative within a larger social and historical context. The text engages with exposition of life in China, the Chinese people and customs, in an attempt to re-create the past. Alongside the maps and photographs, there are detailed descriptions of the social conditions of China during the late nineteenth century, as the narrative depicts life under the Qing government, the suffering and humanity of the Chinese people:

In the last decades of the Qing Dynasty in China, the country of Ann Koay in the province of Hokkien was not unlike any other poor rural area in the rest of China. It was a place where people had struggled

⁵⁰ Graham Huggan, *op. cit.*, pp.164-165.

⁵¹ One of the central debates within autobiography studies is the question of “truth” and “authenticity”. Theorists such as James Olney, Roy Pascal, and Paul John Eakin have been concerned with the problem of truth in such writings. This problem, as Linda Warley has argued, is not surprising partly because of ‘the vagaries of memory - is a slippery thing, and so the question for these critics is not ‘is it true’? but ‘what kind of truth is it?’ (p.24) Linda Warley, *op. cit.* Olney has argued that the problem of “truth” in autobiography lies in the fact that the autobiographer, as in the historian, imposes his or her own metaphors on the human past. The very act of autobiographical writing is suspect because memory, the means by which one creates autobiography, is not only a process by which the autobiographer repeats his past experience but a means by which one also reconstructs the experience. Imagination, in which case, ‘becomes a necessary element of true recollection’. (p.37) The idea of “truth” in autobiography thus becomes unquestionably problematic. See James Olney, *op. cit.* For more on the subject see Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960, and Paul John Eakin, *Fictions of Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

over countless generations to survive against odds which were often overwhelming.⁵²

What is apparent here is that the narrator attempts to claim for himself a certain autonomy over the events and history of the biography, and he does so by reminding us of the historical context behind Bheng Khay's life-account. The narrator also stresses the purpose of the narrative as a tribute to the many China-born immigrants who arrived in Singapore during the period of the early diaspora: '[t]his is the story of the hundreds of thousands of founding fathers of Singapore.'⁵³ The excerpt here has the effect of articulating a collective identity of the Chinese immigrants, and the individual life of Bheng Khay is portrayed as the embodiment of the larger experience of the diasporic migrant. It is as if the biography is allegorical, seeking to represent in a single life a typical experience of the China-born Chinese.

At the same time, the narrator claims a strong hold upon reality and assumes authorial power over the reader. He does so by drawing on family stories to re-create Bheng Khay's diasporic experience. Unlike Low in *Chinese Jetsam*, the narrator in *China Roots* does not have direct memories of the old world or first-hand knowledge of the immigrant experience. Rather, his understanding of the immigrant experience and immigrant community is necessarily transmitted to him from the previous generation in the family, and story-telling in this case becomes the means through which the narrator's family passes on to him memories of the culture: ' "I do remember

⁵² Mark Tan, *op. cit.*, p.17.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.10.

some stories, ... Your mother will be able to tell you more. You go and see the people I mentioned, they should have a lot more to tell you.”⁵⁴

The structure of the narrative is therefore a form of story-telling, through which the narrator conceives and perceives Bheng Khay's life, and as the narrative proceeds, the autobiographical 'I' in *China Roots* is substituted for a biographical 'He'. An effect of this is the obvious distance the narrator creates between himself, the protagonist, and the reader. Unlike Low who provides an intimate account of his thoughts, feelings and experiences as the narrator and autobiographer, the narrator in *China Roots* does not assume such an authority. Instead, his position within the account is a good deal more ambivalent and the narrative voice remains distant. The narrator uses the detachment of a third-person narrative and devotes the bulk of it to describing and explicating the experience of the protagonist, with little space left for reflecting and interpreting the latter's thoughts and feelings. The narrative is joined together by facets of family stories, as the narrator purports to capture the specificities of the protagonist's personal experience. The mother's story and memories in particular, are critical sources of knowledge from which to view Bheng Khay's experiences in the diaspora. Additionally, they provide a link from the past to the present, and re-create the diasporic experience for the reader.

The narrative's composition, the use of family stories, maps, and photographs add to the authenticity of Bheng Khay's immigrant story. *China Roots* is constructed as an authentic account of a China-born Chinese who has been part of the early diaspora. The book presents the life of the China-born, with a nostalgia for the Chinese

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p.12.

subject as a figure of nobility and simplicity. In the process, the reader tends to believe that the life and places depicted represent the China-born immigrant experience in Singapore during the period. It is clear that the narrator of *China Roots* presumes to represent, at least to some measure, the “reality” and “truth” of the immigrant past.

The Question of a Chinese Identity: The China-born Chinese in China.

Just as spatial and cartographic constructions are places from which to imagine and construct the diasporic experience, they are also cultural spaces in which identities and belongings are constituted. I argue in this section that as the diasporic subject in each narrative adapts and reinvents both himself and the space around him, his identity as a China-born immigrant is continually “mapped” and affirmed throughout the course of his diasporic experience. The protagonists in *Chinese Jetsam* and *China Roots* share a common experience of having to confront their sense of identity and selfhood, and the question of each protagonist’s identification with China and with the diaspora is a central concern in the two narratives. The texts dramatise the clashes and contradictions between various cultures, and the protagonists’ sense of living between cultural boundaries. Thus, the following discussion will explore the immigrants’ self-discovery of what it means to be “Chinese” in their *jia xiang* on the one hand, and in the new world on the other.

In *Chinese Jetsam*, Low’s struggle to find his own voice and identity begins in his place of birth, and the autobiography reveals the intensity of this endeavour, throughout his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The stories of his early

experiences in China illuminate the very *difficulty* of constructing a position from which he can “speak” as a Chinese. For Low, being a Chinese and a Christian in China has its paradoxes. To begin with, his own definition of what it means to be Chinese is formed by his disengagement from and at once attachment to his traditional culture. Low reveals the struggle he has had to face in order to define his identity in relation to both the Chinese culture and his Christian faith. On the one hand, he attempts to articulate his identity in relation to the Chinese culture: ‘[w]ith us Chinese, if someone asks our age, we commonly give him the ‘[a]nimal [y]ear’ of our birth: the Dragon year, the Pig Year, the Rat Year, as the case may be. ...’.⁵⁵ On the other hand, his Christian faith complicates his identification with the Chinese belief in astrology. Almost immediately after his exposition on Chinese birth dates, Low shows how his attempt to relate to the ancestral culture is greatly subverted by his Christian belief. This surfaces in his apparent failure to establish the Animal Year of his birth, ‘I cannot give my exact age. I do not know it. ... My parents never told me the ‘Animal Year’ of my birth. They were Christians.’⁵⁶ It is clear here that Low’s Christianity generates confusions and ambiguities, and the fact that he has no knowledge of the ‘Animal Year’ of his birth reinforces his uncertain sense of identity. It is also clear that as a Christian in his native village, Low is positioned outside the realm of the dominant practice. His sense of alienation emerges as a result of his futile struggle to articulate an identity in relation to the Chinese lunar calendar.

Being a Christian in China consequently illuminates Low’s sense of being an Other, of being out-of-place, even in his own community. As a child, he experiences

⁵⁵ N.I. Low., *op. cit.*, p.1.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

similar feelings of alienation and culture disempowerment on occasions when his family is ostracised from the traditional practice of ancestral worship: '[a]s Christians, my parents could not participate in the rites of ancestral worship. We were thus cut off from one important area of the communal life of our clan.'⁵⁷ Later in the narrative, Low again recounts his bitter discovery that his "place" in the village is irrevocably defined by his Christian faith. He realises his status as 'an outsider'⁵⁸ in his own community when he is cut off from enjoying the Chinese theatrical shows held annually in honour of the Chinese deities: '[f]rom all this riotus [sic] fun I am cut off, thanks to a narrow desiccated view of Christianity that sees in the sermon fit fare for the famished soul, making the rafters ring, ...'⁵⁹ Low fails to understand why he is prohibited from participating and watching the theatrical shows. His confusion is apparent again as he questions, 'why, oh why, was I not taken to theatrical shows, and taken again and again?'⁶⁰ In the excerpts here, the subject's sense of displacement in the community of the hamlet is clear. To be excluded from the rites of ancestral worship then is to exist outside the imaginary order, and this exclusion, in effect, relegates Low and his family to the status of minority, as impure Chinese constructs, even though it is not stated explicitly as such.

What is evident, therefore, is that one of the characteristics of Low's identity as a result of his migration to the diaspora is the existence of a double self, as he finds himself caught between two universes: that of his Chinese and Christian worlds. This position of liminality, of being 'between and among'⁶¹ cultural spaces, as Lavie and

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p.9.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.53.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p.55.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p.53.

⁶¹ Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, *op. cit.*, p.13.

Swedenburg suggest, is a characteristic of diasporic subjects. This is because the very notion of 'diasporas', they argue, refers to the 'doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places',⁶² and indeed, to the duality of space and identity that diasporic populations occupy and embody. For Low in *Chinese Jetsam*, an effect of this liminality is that he remains marginalised in almost every communal activity, even in his native village, where he finds himself situated on the margins of his own culture, always removed from the realm of activities within the very culture he inhabits. At the same time, Low becomes the 'object' of his community's representation. This is revealed when he explains how his community perceives him and the rest of his fellow Christians in the country: 'Christians of my part of China were prone to be uppish, fancying themselves a cut above their neighbours.'⁶³ Throughout the narrative, Low sustains the tension between two competing self-representations: that of his Christian upbringing and that of his traditional upbringing. As a Christian, he sees the rest of his community as an image of otherness, of what he is not, and therefore an essential reminder of what he essentially is.

Yet, the place of a minor discourse from which Low struggles to speak and write, is also the space from which a new subjectivity emerges, and the narrative points to his attempt at adopting some form of strategy of constituting himself as a male subject within the community. From a marginalised position as a Christian, Low attempts to lay claim to membership in his community by placing emphasis on his genealogy to the patriarch of the village. He affectionately traces his line of descent as a male member of the clan to the family patriarch:

⁶² *ibid.*, p.14.

⁶³ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.1.

Indeed, all the males of the village were Lows, directly descended from the patriarch who founded our village. We all knew our places in the family hierarchy, thanks to our names. All the males of every generation shared the second character of the full name. I was Low Ching Luan. The 'Ching', meaning to lift up, was common to all males of my generation, denoting that we were twigs on the branches growing out from the parent tree at the same level.⁶⁴

In the above excerpt, Low asserts his identity by invoking lineage and ancestral connections with the village, the patriarch, and the past. He alludes to the image of his genealogical tree, or in his phrase, 'parent tree', and employs metaphors of nature; of 'twigs', and of 'branches', as a way of conceptualising and emphasising his affiliations with the village and family. Stefen Helmreich argues that images of the natural landscape are used to denote a connection between people and their place of origin, and that a metaphor of nature, such as that of the family tree, 'suggests ancestral seeds from which genealogies sprout in particular soils (or oceans)'.⁶⁵ In Low's case, he draws on the imagery of 'twigs on branches growing out from the parent tree' as a way of describing his ancestral and genealogical relationship to his homeland. As such, by tracing his line of descent, Low is in effect acknowledging and "naturalising" his ties and connections to the clan. In doing so, he is also claiming his place and position in the family as his own special territory. The autobiographical 'I' in the sentence 'I was Low Ching Luan' occupies a central position in the narrative, and Low can be said to assert his "natural" right to his family name, and with it his status within the family.

Low's attempts to claim ownership to and identify with his community are also reflected in his depiction of communal life in the village. Moreover, his memories of

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p.4.

the village reveal his rapport with the community and his sense of belonging to the family and clan:

We wore thick, cotton-padded coats, ... We were too poor to have more than one suit, ... Our clothes also became verminous. ... We used bamboo scrapers with which to scratch ourselves. ... We wore our hair long, braided into queues.⁶⁶

The narrative here collapses into a series of related “We”s. The collective pronoun used at the start of each sentence works to reinforce Low’s identification with his Chinese community. The narrative also suggests that he is providing an exposition of his people from the vantage point of a native. In a sense, by identifying with the rest of the village, Low reveals his intentions to be recognised by his community, to preserve a vanishing way of life, and hence celebrate its cultural continuity and identity. This claim for membership shows that the struggle for a minority, like all minorities, is not simply about the fight against oppression, but also about the contention of ownership. In this case, it is the diasporic subject’s struggle for ownership of his *jia xiang*, his culture, and his heritage.

Low’s identity is inextricably bound with his community and culture. How he presents and explains China to us undoubtedly shows his desire to identify with his ancestral home. This is most obvious towards the end of the narrative in a tribute he pays to his immigrant ancestors:

Men love to rub it into us Chinese that we are all of immigrant stock, that we are not descendants of aborigines, that none of us can

⁶⁵ Stefen Helmreich, *op. cit.*, p.246.

⁶⁶ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.14.

claim to be sons of the soil. ... Some are descended from stock freshly uprooted from China and planted here. Others are descended from stock originally planted in Sumatra, or Java, or Siam, or Burma and from there transplanted to Singapore, here to send down roots and flourish exceedingly.

Whatever the original stock, it did not submit to the painful process of uprooting for the fun of it. It submitted from sheer necessity. The native soil was overcrowded. ... We were mere jetsam, washed on these shores. My parents' bones lie in paupers' graves, if they have not been dug up and thrown away to make place for later occupants.⁶⁷

It is clear from the above narrative that Low speaks *as* a China-born Chinese. His sentences include 'us Chinese....', 'We were ...', 'We are all ...', and 'We are not ...'. Thus, despite his criticism of the village in its treatment of the male cousin, as seen in the previous section, his identification with China, and "Chineseness" is by no means in doubt. On the contrary, by reinforcing the 'painful process of uprooting' from China, he only seems to strengthen his sense of Chinese identity. Furthermore, what is also distinctive in the above excerpt is how Low works with organic metaphors of soil, land, and roots to describe the bond between the China-born Chinese and their *jia xiang* in China. Liisa Malkki argues that the links between people and the place they inhabit are often conceived in plant metaphors, such as trees, soils, transplantation, and uprootedness.⁶⁸ Such commonsense ideas of 'soil, roots, and territory', as she says, 'are built into everyday language and often also into scholarly work',⁶⁹ and people are often thought of and think of themselves 'as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness.'⁷⁰ The narrative above clearly supports Malkki's argument. In the two paragraphs, Low constructs an ecological account of the relationship between himself, his fellow China-born Chinese, and the 'native soil' which

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, pp.111-112.

⁶⁸ Liisa Malkki, 'National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialisation of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees' in *Cultural Anthropology* 7, 1992, pp.24-44.

they hold in common. It is also appropriate to note here that the notion of “roots” is contained within all the concepts of ‘uprooting’, ‘planting’, ‘transplanting’, and flourishing, and this is symbolic in its Chinese translation “*gen*”. According to the *Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary*,⁷¹ the word “*gen*” or “roots” carries several meanings. Aside from its basic biological significance, it symbolises the genesis and maintenance of life. At another level, it is also used to designate one’s birthplace or ancestral place.

In the light of *Chinese Jetsam*, the two definitions of “*gen*” can be said to epitomise the diasporic subject’s sense of identity, and sense of what it means to be Chinese. As the word “*gen*” suggests, Low’s identity is inextricably tied to and equated with his native village. His bond to his “roots” is at once sacred and eternal. At yet another level, the word “*gen*” is also reinforced in the notion of *luo ye gui gen*, a concept symbolic to the *huaqiao* identity which Low embodies.⁷² The section entitled ‘“*Huaqiao*”, Sojourning and the China-born Chinese’ of Chapter Two argues that the extent of the China-born Chinese affinity to their *jia xiang* can be defined by the Chinese proverb *luo ye gui gen* (“falling leaves return to their roots”). The Chinese abroad, as the saying goes, are as fallen leaves who wherever they are, will eventually return to their native roots in China. Like the organic metaphors used in Low’s narrative, the proverb is powerful because it works with botanical metaphors of ‘leaves’ and ‘roots’ to suggest that the Chinese person’s return to China is a natural rather than a social process. To that extent, the notions of *gen* and *luo ye gui gen* can

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p.26.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p.27.

⁷¹ For the meaning(s) of *gen*, see also the Chinese Dictionary: *Xin Hanyu Zi Dian*.

⁷² For the definition of *huaqiao* and *luo ye gui gen*, see Chapter Two.

be said to characterise Low's sense of identity. They describe his urge to identify with China while also depicting him, and the rest of the China-born Chinese, as "seeds" sown in foreign soil, taking root wherever they have emigrated.

Like *Chinese Jetsam*, *China Roots* also depicts Bheng Khay's difficulty in constructing a position from which he can articulate his sense of what it means to be a Chinese in China. Like Low, Bheng Khay is situated within the margins of his own community. His early experiences in the homeland are marked by his essential separation from the rest of the family, as he is, we are told, marginalised at an early age having been forgotten by his father soon after birth.⁷³ His identity is defined only in relation to his hierarchical status within the family; the tenth child and the son of the fourth wife of the patriarch, and this last factor relegates his position to the bottom ranks of the family lineage.

At the same time, Bheng Khay's sense of identity is defined in relation to his membership and status in the family, rather than in relation to his own merits as an individual. His sense of alienation and displacement as a result is revealed in his admission that the only impression of his father that he can remember is that 'of an old man sitting in a large chair in the hall, always with a cup of tea on the side table at his elbow, and always talking to some other adults'.⁷⁴ Later, upon the death of his father and the dispersal of the family, Bheng Khay's estrangement from his community also becomes apparent when he admits that he has 'no impressions of his village and had

⁷³ Mark Tan, *op. cit.*, p.22.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p.24.

retained very vague memories of his journey to Amoy.⁷⁵ His only locus of identification is his elder brother, Ah San, with whom he travelled to the village of Amoy after the break up of the family and who becomes a surrogate father to him, 'Ah San had been his only family for the past few years - a brother and often, a father to him.'⁷⁶

Although alienated and excluded from his native community, Bheng Khay must assume a productive role in society if he is to negotiate an identity for himself. This role is gradually achieved with his stay in the capital city of Amoy as an apprentice coppersmith, and later as an immigrant in Nanyang. In Amoy, Bheng Khay is not cast onto the margins of society as he was in his village. Rather, he is united with others with whom he interacts. His knowledge of the external world, and indeed of his own world, also gradually increases as he becomes aware of the need to question the cultural definitions that he has come to accept: '[h]e poured tea, listened, asked a question once in a while, and he learned.'⁷⁷ Bheng Khay's stay in Amoy enhances his knowledge of Nanyang, the new world to which many Chinese people have emigrated, as we are told, he 'made some attempts to find out more about the place called Nanyang. On those rare occasions when he was out alone, he went down to the port to listen to people talk about Nanyang.'⁷⁸ He shares with his fellow Chinese the expectations about the kind of place they can make for themselves in the new world. The diaspora, as envisioned by Bheng Khay and his friends, is an idea, a concept, even before it is a geographical reality.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.31.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p.38.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.36.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p.38.

Bheng Khay's material poverty leads him to imagine the diaspora as a "land of promise". Vijay Mishra speaks of the diaspora's homeland as an imaginary construct because, according to him, it is constructed from a distance and "lives" in the mind of the diasporic subject. In *China Roots*, the reverse holds true in the sense that the diaspora itself becomes an imaginary construct. For Bheng Khay, who has never been to Singapore, the settlement is not so much a physical state as it is a psychological concept formulated by the rest of his fellow Chinese. He expresses his expectations of the new world as follows:

On rare occasions when he was out alone, he went down to the port to listen to people talk about Nanyang. He picked up some random facts and learned of two shops that arranged trips there. ... Of all the wild and disconnected facts he had learned about Nanyang, what fascinated him most was that there was apparently a lot of land in Nanyang owned by nobody. No landlords. A person could plant anything he wanted practically anywhere.

The passage above, which tells us of the 'random facts' that Bheng Khay learns about the diaspora, is perhaps evidence of what the theorist William Boelhower describes as the 'dream rhetoric', or the 'moment of anticipation',⁷⁹ where the immigrant protagonist in the autobiography conjures up an ideal image of the new world. In this case, Nanyang becomes the new world, and Bheng Khay's fascination with it, and with

⁷⁹ William Boelhower, 'The Brave New World of Immigrant Autobiography' in *Journal of the Society of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, Vol.9 No.2, 1982, p.32. In the essay, Boelhower introduces a theoretical model for exploring the formation of the immigrant subject in autobiography. Placing his model in the context of American immigrant literature, he traces the immigrant's journey from the Old World to the New, where part of the journey entails the 'moment of anticipation' or the 'dream function', as the immigrant creates an illusion of the New World of how he or she perceives it to be rather than what it is in reality. According to him, 'what is true of one text is true of all, though with varying degrees of intensity.' While Boelhower's claim here of the universality of the immigrant experience remains questionable, it is nonetheless true to say that Bheng Khay in *China Roots*, like

his friends' reports of freedom and fortunes, is clear. The narrative illuminates Bheng Khay's ideal vision of the diaspora as a place with 'a lot of land' and '[n]o landlords'. In fact, he identifies with an image of the diaspora that represents how he would like it to be. Like Mishra's 'imaginary homeland', the "imaginary diaspora" here becomes, then, a 'kind of jouissance',⁸⁰ a utopia, a dream-like state of being which the migrant subject envisages as perfect and ideal.

It is this dream of the "imaginary diaspora" that eventually leads Bheng Khay to emigrate. However, in order to do so, he must first break through the barrier of his *jia xiang* that shapes his present self. He comes to see that despite his affections for his community in Amoy and for his fellow worker, Uncle Thai, he must assert his independence and his essential separation from his *jia xiang* to realise his selfhood: '[t]his time, he made it clear that he intended to go to Nanyang to work, to make some money and return to Amoy and look after Uncle Thai in his old age.'⁸¹ The narrative here reveals Bheng Khay's intentions of earning money to support Uncle Thai, and it is symbolic that his decision to migrate is based on the assumption that it is a sojourn; a temporary process of relocation and not a step toward permanent settlement. Bheng Khay is therefore a *huaqiao*, that is to say, a China-born Chinese migrant who relocates temporarily from China shores with the aim of returning. This initial configuration of the *huaqiao* identity will bear resonance later in the text when Bheng Khay realises his sojourn has in fact become a prelude to eventual settlement.

that of Boelhower's immigrant, does appear to participate in the dream of the New World. For more on the subject see William Boelhower, *op. cit.*, pp.5-23.

⁸⁰ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.*, p.423.

⁸¹ Mark Tan, *op. cit.*, p.41.

From Amoy, Foochow to Singapore.

For Bheng Khay and Low, the reasons and circumstances for migration vary, and each protagonist's strategy for coping with his diasporic experience is also unique. Yet, by leaving the homeland, both protagonists proceed to transgress the literal boundaries between home and away, and the metaphorical boundaries between one identity to another. In the process, they share a common experience of having to survive in a diaspora; in an alien, often hostile, community. The disorienting and threatening passage from the homeland to the diaspora defines the new world as a space that is fundamentally disconnected from the world that they are familiar with and the world that they have known before, as a space that is figuratively, not on the map. The lives of the protagonists, and the texts that contain them, therefore, have certain shared themes and patterns, as both *Chinese Jetsam* and *China Roots* dramatise the difficulties that have evolved out of the Chinese subjects' immigrant experiences in the diaspora. The texts emphasise the protagonist's awkward position of analysing and responding to a "Chinese" immigrant or diasporic culture.

Encouraged by what he imagines the diaspora to be, Bheng Khay in *China Roots* decides to emigrate to the new world. In the diaspora, his expectations of Singapore are no longer a vision, but a reality. Upon landing in the settlement, his dream of the new world proves to be misconceived:

It came as a great disappointment. ...What Bheng Khay saw was just another coastline, uninhabited, overgrown with jungle, steaming in the

morning sun, no different from any of the many islands they had passed during the eight day voyage.⁸²

The narrative describes Bheng Khay's realisation of the contrast between his vision of the diaspora and its reality. He evaluates what he observes in the diaspora, and comes to the conclusion that the New World is 'a great disappointment.' Further on in the narrative, his disillusionment with the new world is reinforced. Expecting to find the street of Singapore paved with gold, and masses of land ready to be claimed, Bheng Khay's hopes of wealth and happiness vanish: '[f]or years he had dreamt about this place, and in his imagination Sing Chew had taken on a shape and colour quite different from what he had experienced so far'.⁸³ The immigrant subject, as Boelhower argues, is 'totally committed to affirming or refuting the reality of the [n]ew [w]orld',⁸⁴ as it compares and contrasts the dream of the new place and its reality. In the case of the subject in *China Roots*, the dream does not come true, and it is, a 'monumental anti-climax.'⁸⁵

The new life that greets Bheng Khay is also a far cry from the intimate community of his *jia xiang*. Cut off from the familiarity of his native village and community, Bheng Khay's immigrant experience is fraught with anxiety and difficulty as he finds that he has to constantly negotiate his identity within the diaspora. Bheng Khay becomes an object of representation within the space of the dominant discourse. In the diaspora, he is just another immigrant like the rest of the China-born Chinese:

⁸² *ibid.*, p.50.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p.54.

⁸⁴ William Boelhower, *op. cit.*, p.9.

⁸⁵ Mark Tan, *op. cit.*, p.54.

For convenience and simplicity, nicknames were used. Names such as 'Blackie', 'The Young One' and 'Skinny' were easy to remember for the uneducated. Nicknames also provided the visual association that made easy identification, as well as providing the anonymity that many *sinkehs* preferred as a kind of protection from having only strangers around them.⁸⁶

The excerpt above reflects Bheng Khay's encounter with racism in the host society. The racist name-calling suggests that his identity in the diaspora is inseparable from his status as an immigrant and coolie. Moreover, the nicknames are cruel reminders of the China-borns' status as outsiders, and of their immigrant identity. In fact, being a Chinese from China proves to be a liability in the diaspora. Bheng Khay's existence in the new place is defined only in relation to his work as a coolie, and like the rest of the China-borns, he shares the burden of having to endure the severe working conditions of life as an immigrant:

There were endless chores to occupy all the four workers in the shop. Between them they did all the loading, unloading, stacking, arranging, rearranging, repacking, weighing, cleaning, and sorting of goods, besides sweeping and cleaning the shop. They did all this day in and day out from dawn until 8pm each night.⁸⁷

The dehumanisation of the coolies to a physical form of automaton is self-explanatory. As an outsider and immigrant, Bheng Khay is reduced to the plight of many China-borns brought to the Nanyang as indentured workers, and who are subject to the tedious, manual routine of 'loading, unloading, stacking, arranging ...'

Bheng Khay's vulnerability as an immigrant living in the diaspora is clear from the text: '[h]e had discovered through personal experience that for a *sinkeh* struggling

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p.66.

to find himself and to survive in a strange new land, the first year or so was one of blurred memories and nameless faces.’⁸⁸ The ‘blurred memories’ and ‘nameless faces’ suggest an incapacitating sense of alienation. As a *sinkeh*, or new-comer, ‘struggling to find himself’ and survive in the new land, the narrative suggests that Bheng Khay is an “uprooted” and dislocated individual, devoid of any sense of connection to his new environment. Later on in the narrative, we are told that in an attempt to adapt to life in the diaspora, Bheng Khay cuts off his queue. In doing so, he asserts his identity as a physical representation of his native Chinese community and therefore distinguishes himself from the Manchus, the revolutionaries of China.⁸⁹

Like Bheng Khay, Low’s response to the new country of the diaspora is also a painful process of accommodation to an alien environment. While the diaspora offers new opportunities, it can also be read as a space of anarchy and a site of resistance for the young Low. The tension that he feels as a result of his efforts to establish his own position in relation to the past intensifies with his migration from one cultural world to another. This is evident in the diasporic community, where Low is forced to negotiate his position between the dominant Straits-born community and that of his own China-born one. It seems that whether as a Christian in his native village, or as an immigrant in the diaspora, Low’s subjectivity is equally imposed upon by the authority of the dominant group. In his native village, he is marginalised by the community because of his Christian faith. In the diaspora, he is discriminated against by the Straits-borns because of his China-born origins, and is made an ‘object’ of their representation. This

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.58.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p.66.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p.67.

is how Low and the rest of the other Chinese immigrants are perceived from the point of view of the Straits-born Chinese:

Really, the Straits-borns of half a century ago had the most naïve ideas about China and its people. To them, China was like the *ulus*, the backwoods of Malaya and the people of China like the rickshaw-pullers.⁹⁰

It is clear from the narrative that by virtue of his China-born origins, Low is positioned within the margins of the diaspora by the Straits-borns, who produce the ideological structures which construct his subjectivity and that of the other China-born coolies. The Straits-born people also reinforce the stereotype of the China-borns as '*ulus*'; unassimilable aliens who are socially and intellectually backward. It is also at this point of the narrative that Low realises he is different from the Straits Chinese in the host society, who have grown up under a different culture and a different set of rulers.

However, despite being the object of discrimination, Low is defiant as he realises that there are also possible sites from where he can construct his own sense of identity. Thus, Low's diasporic experience is also a space in which he articulates his notion of "Chineseness", of what it means to be Chinese. In an attempt to challenge the authority of the Straits-born Chinese, he works out his own subject position within the host nation and this necessarily involves a deliberate act of self-assertion on his part. As he recounts, '[i]n vain did I protest that I was not a Hockchia, but a Hockchiu, a Foochow. They could not or would not see the difference.'⁹¹ The narrative here describes Low's lonely struggle in coming to terms with the fact that the Straits-borns'

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p.50.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p.74.

perceptions of him do not match his own self-perception, thus, while he recognises the difference between his identity as a Hockchiu and the Hockchias, the Straits-born Chinese do not.

The tension that Low feels as a result of his efforts to find his own position in the diaspora is clearly expressed here. He responds by attempting to protect his people from vilification, and does so by exposing the hypocrisy of the Straits-born community towards the immigrant rickshaw-pullers: '[t]hey saved their patrons the trouble of walking in this hot-sticky climate, but they received, in addition to the fare, the contempt of their patrons.'⁹² Low's construction of his own sense of self culminates in his renunciation of his Christian belief, in an attempt, perhaps, to enforce the authority of his ethnic culture and thereby establish his Chinese self, 'I was then given a form to read out aloud in the presence of my sponsor. In it I vowed to 'return to the root, to relapse to the ancestral'. This was in effect a renunciation of Christianity.'⁹³

Up to this point in the narrative, it is apparent that Low does not make a conscious effort to integrate into the diaspora. This is supported during his stay with a Straits Chinese family, the 'Khoo's, who provide him with lodging in return for his domestic services within the household. Initially, the family defines Low's place and sets the limits of his subjectivity within the structures of the family and the community. Later, he finds his life transformed by the family as he becomes educated and trained in the arts, and, most importantly, re-initiated into the Christian religion. He recounts his early experience of being ridiculed by a nephew in the family, 'You a Peranakan? You

⁹² *ibid.*, p.133.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p.140.

are only a *Cheena-bachia!*' The expression 'Cheena-bachia' here is a derogatory term referring to a person whose origins are in China. There is thus a sense of bitterness in Low's tone of voice when he describes his stay with the Khoos, 'I was in the Khoo home but was never a genuine member of the Khoo family.'⁹⁴ The sense of alienation that Low experiences here is apparent. His attempts to assimilate into the family only lead him to the bitter discovery that his "place" within the family is irrevocably defined by his China-born origins. Even if Low wishes to identify with the Straits-born Chinese, it is clear from this incident with the nephew that he has not yet been recognised as being a part of the community.

Lavie and Swedenburg argue that borders, like diasporas, are not just places of 'happy hybridities for us to celebrate', but they can just as easily be zones of 'loss, alienation, [and] pain',⁹⁵ and Low's experience here is certainly evidence of this. As the narrative progresses, the text abounds in details that exemplify Low's struggle for identity as both painful and complex. The text depicts his precarious position: he is not Chinese enough for his native community in Foochow, and not Straits-born Chinese enough to find a home among the Straits-born. Living in the border, or in diaspora, as Lavie and Swedenburg suggest, 'is frequently to experience the feeling of being trapped in an impossible in-between',⁹⁶ and the protagonist in *Chinese Jetsam*, who lives his life on the edge of the Foochow and Straits-born Chinese communities, while juggling his complicated diasporic experiences, is certainly evidence of it.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p.84.

⁹⁵ Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, *op. cit.*, p.15.

From China-born Chinese to Straits-born Chinese.

The discussion so far has focused on Bheng Khay and Low as individuals who have lived the immigrant experience. Both protagonists' journeys to the diaspora are fraught with tensions and anxieties. However, it is also intriguing to contrast how differently Low and Tan handle the issue of a Chinese identity through their narratives. While Bheng Khay at the closing scene of *China Roots* is portrayed as an old man, tired, prosaic, lonely, and whose illusions of returning to the homeland have vanished, but whose nostalgia for the ancestral home in China still exists, *Chinese Jetsam* offers an alternative representation of the Chinese subject. Low's educational background and earlier exposure to Western ideas lead him to a different life experience in the diaspora compared to Bheng Khay. At the end of the autobiography, Low comes across as an individual who chooses to identify with the country he has migrated to, and who has managed to reinvent his identity according to circumstances and needs. While Bheng Khay continues to cling onto the homeland as a form of consolation, the diasporic individual in *Chinese Jetsam* remains indifferent to the prospect of an eventual return to China.

For Low, what it means to be Chinese is relationally defined in the sense that it is not circumscribed within an essentialist or fixed notion, neither is it definitive nor grounded in China. As the narrative progresses, there is a sense of Low coming to terms with a new Chinese identity in the diaspora. This is illustrated through his attempts to orient himself to the Khoo family, and with it the Straits-born community. Ironically, this orientation toward the newly adopted place of residence is marked by

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

his re-affirmation of the Christian faith. Under the guidance of Mrs. Khoo, Low is encouraged to 'memorise one verse of the Bible everyday.'⁹⁷ His re-initiation into the Christian faith is sealed with his confirmation by the Bishop.⁹⁸ If life is a journey, then Low's life in the diaspora is as much a spiritual journey as it is a linguistic one. Mid-way into the narrative, he speaks the language appropriated from the Straits Chinese and learns to speak and write *Baba Malay*, '[w]e gathered in the enormous hall for prayers at night, saying the prayers and reciting the psalms in Malay.'⁹⁹ It is clear here that *Baba Malay* is Low's entry to the world of the Straits-borns, that is, the world outside China.

At the same time, as Low finally chooses to identify himself with the country he has migrated to, he recognises his estrangement from his China-born origins, and is forced to admit his incompetence in the Chinese language:

I had forgotten every Chinese character, though I had been able to read the Bible in the Foochow vernacular at the time of my parents' death. ... In spite of my immense outlay of time and energy on Chinese, I am unable to produce a simple letter in Chinese, Classical, modern or Vernacular.¹⁰⁰

It is significant that Low, like the local Straits-borns, is not proficient in the Chinese language, thus his gain in *Baba Malay* is balanced by the loss of his native tongue. In the end, for all his initial resistance to assimilation, the final chapters of the narrative point to his gradual rejection and disengagement from his Chinese heritage: 'I would forget all my Chinese, printed or spoken, I wonder why. Was I so determined to shed

⁹⁷ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.85.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p.97.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p.78.

my Chinese skin and grow a new one?’¹⁰¹ By questioning his disengagement from the Chinese culture, Low challenges and/or rejects the authority of his China-born origins. Furthermore, in a desperate attempt to assume a more Straits-born Chinese guise, he cuts off his queue,¹⁰² which can be read as a desire on his part to lose the evidence of his China-born origins. In doing so, he gives himself a new identity and silences that part of himself that identifies him as a China-born Chinese.

Low’s own realisation of his estrangement from his ancestral culture and homeland culminates with a symbolic return to his ancestral home. His diasporic journey can therefore be said to be circular in nature as he travels to his place of birth. In his native village, Low measures and evaluates the difference between the China he knew when he was a child and how it is now. That he is fully aware of the degree of this difference is clear almost immediately upon his return, and this realisation marks the climax of his narrative, ‘[m]y native village was even more down-at-heels than I had known it. The only living creature I saw in my family-house was a pig. All my first cousins had migrated to Sibü, Sarawak.’¹⁰³ Low returns to his native village where he has lived as a child, only to find that the village has changed, and the people have moved on. He also finds that Kutien Town was not how it was when he left:

My next visit was to Kutien Town. I had a shock. Where, oh Where were the towering walls surrounding the town? The walls were there, all right, but they were sadly diminished in size for me. A man

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p.99.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p.72.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p.83.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p.105.

standing on the shoulders of another man could easily climb in by one of the parapets.¹⁰⁴

The image of the diminished walls signifies how far removed Low is from his homeland. At the end of the visit, he realises the discrepancy between his memory of the homeland and its present reality. If, according to William Safran, that diasporic subjects are characterised by their myth of return to the homeland,¹⁰⁵ then Low has no myth of return because he realises at the end that there is no place to return to. Low recognises that his memory of his village in China has become a figment of the past and of his memory. His assimilation into the Straits-born Chinese community therefore problematises the notion of a diaspora, which is partly predicated on the notion of a homeland and the possibility of a return.

However, Low's apparent estrangement from his China-born roots does not mean he is totally cut off from his origins. On the contrary, lacking deep roots in the host society, he adopts some strategy of re-defining himself in relation to his ancestral land in China. He realises that he is not solely a repository for his culture's traditions, neither is he simply an extension of his community. Low as an adult finally comes to terms with his Chinese heritage and his life in the diaspora. He confides in us, '[i]f I owed China my physical being, I owed England my mental and spiritual nurture.'¹⁰⁶ Diasporas and border zones, as Lavie and Swedenburg suggest, are 'sites of creative cultural creolisation',¹⁰⁷ and here, the diasporic subject is depicted as being a part of two worlds: the colonial world of the diaspora being one, and his country of origin the

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.106.

¹⁰⁵ William Safran, *op. cit.*, p.83.

¹⁰⁶ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.146.

¹⁰⁷ Lavie and Swedenburg, *op. cit.*, p.15.

other. It is only with this realisation that Low finally finds some form of fulfilment in his sense of self without being imprisoned in his ancestral past. There is a new voice branching out from him as he finally reconciles his Christian faith and ethnic identity. It is only in the final chapters of the narrative that he articulates most explicitly his identification with his Chinese heritage, and the strategy he has found for making peace with that heritage. The narrative concludes, 'I am not a whit less Chinese for being Christian.'¹⁰⁸ There is a sense of Low here separating from his China-born Chinese identity, but there is also a sense of him connecting with his newly acquired Straits-born Chinese identity.

Low's autobiography can therefore be seen as a testimony of how he comes to terms with being in a liminal position between cultures; where he is both drawn to and repelled by the culture and traditions of his ancestors. The text subverts singular definitions of identity, and fixed notions of what it means to be Chinese. Stuart Hall has proposed a theory of identity as 'a form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enables us to discover places from which to speak.'¹⁰⁹ To put it another way, identity, as Hall sees it, is not confined to a fixed or definitive notion, but to one that is constantly in flux and which takes on a multitude of meanings, and *Chinese Jetsam* illuminates the precariousness of this. "China", the mythic homeland, stops being the absolute norm against which Low measures his identity. Instead, "Chineseness" becomes an open signifier in which he constructs a new, hybrid one. For Low, the concept of a Chinese identity is a continuous process of assigning new meanings. He adapts to his new cultural realities and proves that there

¹⁰⁸ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.142.

¹⁰⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', pp.236-237.

exist liberating possibilities for selfhood, even within the problematic confines of his immigrant discourse. This is particularly significant towards the end of the narrative when he shows how, by questioning the very constitution and centrality of his Chinese identity, he contributes to a re-definition of his self. At the end of the account, Low's self representation signifies his successful integration into the existing social order of the diasporic world and is embodied in the 'eclectic Chinaman'¹¹⁰ that he has become.

Like *Chinese Jetsam*, *China Roots* encapsulates the protagonist's process of accommodation to life in the diaspora. However, Bheng Khay's diasporic experience as a China-born Chinese differs greatly from Low's. Even though Bheng Khay is a seemingly successful immigrant with a flourishing business, he does not separate himself from his China-born origins but remains bound in his relationship to his culture and native village. While Low loses his sense of connectedness with his Chinese culture, Bheng Khay maintains allegiance to the old Chinese traditions of filial obligations. This is revealed through his regular visits back to China, the remittances he sends home, and his subsequent marriage to Poh Kway, the daughter of a reputable family in China. Wang Gungwu has argued that many China-born Chinese give the impression of being in transience and looked far more to China and did not care to identify themselves with the areas in which they lived. This is especially obvious in the way Bheng Khay seems to have responded to life in the diaspora as revealed in a letter he wrote to Poh Kway:

The letter asked after her health and told her formally that business was usual in Nanyang. ... The letter then specified that half the money

¹¹⁰ N.I. Low, *op. cit.*, p.136.

was for family expenses meaning that it was to go to Second Brother, and the other half for Poh Kway to keep until his return.¹¹¹

The concern that Bheng Khay clearly feels for his family, and his request for Poh Kway to keep a proportion of the remittance until his return, all contribute to a picture of the diasporic subject committed to being loyal to his ancestral home and family. As Safran puts it, members of the diaspora ‘regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home’ and ‘they relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another.’¹¹² It is this attachment to the homeland that is constitutive to diasporas, and that which defines Bheng Khay’s sense of identity and belonging. Even after many years in the diaspora, his definitions remain “traditionally Chinese”, in the sense that he continues to maintain personal and cultural ties with the ancestral home. In fact, Bheng Khay is the epitome of Safran’s diasporic subject, who perceives the ancestral home as a place of eventual return. Like most China-born Chinese, Bheng Khay is motivated by the desire to make money and return to the homeland: ‘he had but one obsession: make money and save it. ... When he was ready to return to China he had accumulated a tidy sum, enough for the construction of a small house in Hong Lai.’¹¹³ Here, the trope of the house can be perceived as a material and architectural embodiment of the protagonist’s connections to his family and home in China, and to which he will eventually return following his sojourn. Thus, despite his migration to the diaspora, it is clear that Bheng Khay still feels a sense of connectedness with his homeland, the feeling of being an integral part of his native community.

¹¹¹ Mark Tan, *op. cit.*, p.75.

¹¹² William Safran, *op. cit.*, p.84.

¹¹³ Mark Tan, *op. cit.*, p.81.

In contrast to *Chinese Jetsam's* immigrant protagonist, who manages to integrate into the local community so effectively, Bheng Khay is unable to forge new ties with the Straits-borns in the host settlement. He is not as conscious as Low of the need to create a new identity. In fact, his self-distancing from the local Straits-born Chinese is perhaps connected with the fact that they are not mentioned in the narrative at all. Bheng Khay remains within the enclave of his own community, maintains his China-born circle of friends and attends regular meetings in the clan associations where he goes to meet other clansmen and learn about recent news in China. A kind of surrogate home, the clan association functions as a repository of old traditions within the diasporic community. The association also compensates for the China-born Chinese's physical remoteness from China by providing the emotional and social support that can sustain Bheng Khay and enable him to feel that he belongs, 'in the absence of family, it felt good to be around clansmen and occasionally someone from Ann Koay.'¹¹⁴ With the support of his kinsmen and the association, and by clinging on to his traditional Chinese values and attitudes, Bheng Khay manages to create for himself some form of internal stability.

However, as long as he remains in the diaspora, Bheng Khay is caught between two worlds: the diaspora and his country of origin. The kind of self that he projects in the *jia xiang* is also quite different from the kind of self projected in the diaspora. He remains consciously situated between the two worlds he inhabits; his native village of Hong Lai in China and his immigrant home in Sing Chew. Within each universe, Bheng Khay assumes a "split" identity. In the former, he is the young wealthy merchant who

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.67.

has made his fortune in Nanyang,¹¹⁵ while in the latter he is like any other immigrant, working hard to realise his ambitions of becoming wealthy.

As with so many China-born *huaqiaos*, Bheng Khay faces the dilemma of remaining in the diaspora or returning to China. His conflict intensifies with his rise from the position of coolie to a proprietor with his own business, '[h]e worked hard, often late into the night, and he saved. In less than a year, he again had to employ an assistant to help him cope with the work.'¹¹⁶ Determined, and intelligent, Bheng Khay has all the qualities that enable him to cope with and to survive in his adaptation to another cultural landscape. His persistence and fortitude pay off when his vegetable business picks up, eventually leading to his gradual rise from poverty to wealth.

Yet, despite his material success, Bheng Khay struggles to affirm his allegiance to his community and family in China on the one hand, and to the life he has acquired in the diaspora on the other. Mishra has theorised the problematic situating of the diasporic self as 'simultaneously belonging "here" and "there"'.¹¹⁷ In Bheng Khay's case, if he affirms his loyalty to his family and natal country, he must return to China and give up the business that he has struggled so hard to achieve. If he continues to stay in the diaspora, he is in danger of being separated from his family and cultural roots permanently, and the emotional trauma that he feels as a result of being away from the family is apparent:

Within a year, he was again taking a trip back home to the 'Tang Hills' - as China was affectionately referred to by the Hokkiens in

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.70.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.73.

¹¹⁷ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.*, p.433.

Nanyang. He went back on the excuse that he wanted to check on the progress of the construction of his house. The truth was that he wanted to see his wife and be with her when she gave birth to their third child.¹¹⁸

Bheng Khay's experience in the diaspora is characterised by a painful yearning for the homeland and his family in China. This is evident from his 'trip back home' again to the Tang Hills, China, and his desire to see and be with the family. Without a doubt, there is a nagging sense that Bheng Khay longs for the life he has left behind in China. Thus, like Mishra's diasporic subject, he is clearly caught in a liminal position; in an interstitial space of simultaneously 'belonging 'here' and 'there'.' However, as Mishra also goes on to contend, the 'belonging there' part of the equation cannot be linked to a teleology of return because this belonging 'can only function as an imaginary index that signifies its own impossibility.'¹¹⁹ For Bheng Khay, the teleology of return ceases to be a reality and becomes, as we shall soon see, a part of the 'diasporic imaginary', as he realises that his homeland in Sing Chew, China, is not what it used to be.

'[A]nother four years and two more trips home'¹²⁰ is enough to convince Bheng Khay that he cannot return to his native village. The homeland has changed: '[h]e watched the gradual breakdown of law and order in the countryside',¹²¹ and his quest for resolution culminates in the realisation that the homeland has become an irretrievable temporal past:

His regular shuttles between China and Sing Chew had given him the opportunity to compare the two places. In Amoy, Chuan Chew, and

¹¹⁸ Mark Tan, *op. cit.*, pp.81-82.

¹¹⁹ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.*, p.433.

¹²⁰ Mark Tan, *op. cit.*, p.83.

¹²¹ *ibid.*

worse, in his native Hong Lai, he saw decay. ... On the other hand, in Sing Chew he saw new roads being laid every month. There were new houses being built everywhere, and everybody seemed to be busy and purposeful... That night, he made up his mind to take his family to Nanyang.’¹²²

In the narrative above, through his regular shuttles between the two countries Bheng Khay is able to perceive the cultural and economic gaps between his ancestral home and the host society. He comes to realise that his native village is quite different from when he left it, and that the desire to return to China is but a consoling form of self-deception. At this crucial moment, Bheng Khay makes the decision to ‘take his family to Nanyang’, and make a permanent home in the diaspora. The narrator defines how he fits into the social order of his new life as a member of the Chinese diaspora in the new world, ‘[t]his was also the first time in his life that Bheng Khay felt truly like the patriarch of a large and successful household, with all his sons married and living under one roof. It made him feel very proud.’¹²³

Yet, for Bheng Khay, this step toward permanent settlement is not tantamount to cultural abandonment. On the contrary, he continues to preserve his ties to his native community and lays claim to membership of his native village and culture, although his affinity with China now exists only in memory. Unlike Low in *Chinese Jetsam*, who is ambivalent toward his native village, Bheng Khay continues to define his identity within the discourse of his native culture and remains firm in his loyalty to China. This is evident as he attempts to reinscribe himself within his ancestral community, where even though the memory of his village has become an irretrievable moment of the past, it is nonetheless sustained and transmitted as a symbolic cultural

¹²² *ibid.*

entity from one generation to the next. Bheng Khay is intent on maintaining his China-born identity and what it represents; an attempt at cultural preservation and continuity that is manifest in an intimate scene between himself and his grandson Teow Yeow:

Bheng Khay sat in the chair near his bed and when Teow Yeow came and stood in front of him, he said: 'Do you know where we came from in China?' 'Hokkien, Ann Koay,' Teow Yeow answered.

'Hong lai village', Bheng Khay added. 'And we had our house at The Crossroads. You must remember all this.'

'Yes, I will.' ...

'Here is a pair of spectacles. My elder brother in China gave it to me many years ago. He said that it belonged to my father - your great-grandfather. Notice that the lenses are not made of glass. They are of natural crystal. Keep it well.'¹²⁴

The above passage, placed at the end of the book, epitomises the loyalty and affection Bheng Khay feels toward his elder brother, Ah San, and the *jia xiang* they share. It also reveals his attempt to re-connect with and preserve the memories of his homeland in China, as he says to his grandson Teow Yeow, '[y]ou must remember all this.' The title of the chapter 'Keep it well', also refers to Bheng Khay's desire to sustain the value systems of his Chinese culture and identity. The pair of spectacles not only symbolises the relationship between the brothers, but they also represent the link between Bheng Khay and his *jia xiang*. The glasses embody a continuing cultural and emotional connection between two generations: Bheng Khay and Teow Yeow, the former passing to his grandson the remnants of Chinese culture. It is as if the pair of spectacles and what they symbolise can in some way compensate for Bheng Khay's physical remoteness from China. If we consider Safran's argument that the diasporic subject is involved in the maintenance and restoration of the homeland, then the

¹²³ *ibid.*, p.134.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, 182.

protagonist's experience in *China Roots* is certainly evidence of it. What connects Bheng Khay with his homeland is ultimately an emotional attachment, despite the fact that he does not actually return to the ancestral home. China, for Bheng Khay, as symbolised by the pair of spectacles, is therefore a repository of comfort and familiarity, and one that exists in memory.

Bheng Khay's sense of identity and what it means to be Chinese is therefore embodied and rooted in the culturally essentialised nature of his China-born Chinese self. His association with his Chinese "roots" and culture, is both an obligatory and illusory configuration of his identity, obligatory because it is precisely his identification with his China-born origins that sustains his life in the diaspora, and illusory not only because Bheng Khay cannot or does not return to China, but also because his 'Chineseness' to which he intuitively clings, will always remain an imaginary figment of his memory, an irretrievable past. According to Mishra, the diasporic subject identifies with an image of the homeland that represents what he would like it to be, rather than what the homeland is in reality.¹²⁵ In *China Roots*, Bheng Khay constructs an image of the homeland that no longer exists. He still thinks of the homeland in very much the same terms as he did many years ago when he was a boy, and when Ah San was alive. The homeland no longer exists except in Bheng Khay. In fact, for him, the homeland in China is not so much a physical state as it is an imagined construct, a "dream" used by him to define his own identity. It is a dream that remains alluring only as long as it remains unrealised.

¹²⁵ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.*, pp.423-425.

It is clear, therefore, how differently Low and Tan handle the issue of a Chinese cultural identity in their narratives. The contradictions and complexities in subject positioning within the Chinese diaspora, as I have tried to explicate, are summed up in their life stories. The texts point not only to the ways in which the diasporic experiences of the China-born protagonists share certain characteristics, but also to the ways in which they differ. The notion of a diasporic Chinese identity is different for different subjects, and cannot be conceived in general terms. If Tan's Bheng Khay is perceived as a China-born Chinese bent on recovering primordial ideals of "Chineseness", then Low is one for whom a Chinese cultural identity is merely one of many possibilities.

Conclusion

To define Chinese identity, as Cho-yun Hsu appropriately remarks, 'is a very difficult task.'¹ I began this thesis by saying that the diaspora of the 1800s came into being with the migration of China-born Chinese to the region. They were predominantly *huaqiaos*, or Chinese sojourners who had left their homeland at a time when China was a distressed society. The migratory movement of these *huaqiaos* intensified during the 1880s and onwards, following the demands for labour in the colony. In the light of these migrants, this thesis argued that the meaning of being Chinese for the diaspora has never been a static structure but a dynamic construct that is susceptible to and a product of change. The advent of Western colonialism during the nineteenth century may be perceived as a critical turn in the diaspora's path to modernity. Yet, colonial power during this period overlooked the possibility that the diasporic Chinese possessed different identities. They were immensely heterogeneous, from different class, cultural, and religious backgrounds, but were nonetheless regarded and maintained as "one" in certain discursive contexts and for certain political purposes. This was particularly true, as I have delineated in Chapter One, for the colonial representations of the diaspora produced by colonial officials and scholars during the nineteenth century.

The main thrust of my argument has therefore been to propose that there was never a single Chinese diaspora. The question of "Chineseness" resists any fixed or singular definitions, and cannot be conceived in general terms. Perspectives on how to be Chinese, and how to relate to China, differ greatly between the Straits-borns and the China-borns. For the latter, the meaning of being "Chinese" is closely linked with the

nation-state of China. It is also lived out in their deep attachment to the *jia xiang*, to their family in the *jia xiang*, and to their ordinary attitudes and customs that are rooted in Chinese traditions transmitted over time. On the other hand, for the Straits-borns, being Chinese has little relevance to being a subject of China. Rather, it is sustained by everyday mores in varying degrees, and in variously modified forms. The possibilities and problems of the cultural politics of diaspora, as Ien Ang suggests, is 'different for different diaspora'.² There are also, as she continues, 'multiple differences within each diasporic group'.³ The significance of Ang's argument is clearly evident in the Chinese situation, and the focus of this thesis has been to interrogate the complexities of identity in diasporic texts and in diasporic individuals. From the Straits-born Chinese to the China-born *huaqiaos* and *sinkeh*s, each diasporic group bears its own historical experiences, its own sense of Chinese identity, and its own legacy of ancestry. In their separate identities, the two groups remained profoundly distinct, and their individual characteristics allow us to understand how it is possible to conceptualise, in diverse ways, the meaning of a Chinese identity within the space of a common diasporic territory.

Yet, the task of defining and analysing a Chinese diasporic identity in terms of the early diaspora has proved difficult, for the main reason that the concepts of "Straits-born" and "China-born" have always been shifting categories, where the distinction between the two groups is by no means fixed or constant. We have seen in Chapter Four the changes that can occur to the meaning of being "Chinese", especially for those China-borns who have assimilated into the local Straits Chinese community.

¹ Cho-yun Hsu, 'A Reflection on Marginality' in Tu Weu-ming (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.239.

² Ien Ang, *op. cit.*, p.5.

The biographical construction of N.I. Low in Chapter Four, for instance, depicts a China-born migrant who has adapted to living in the host nation, and who has negotiated an alternative sense of Chinese identity while adopting a range of non-Chinese values. Others, such as Bheng Khay in *China Roots*, remain conscious of being China-born, and continue to identify with a real or imaginary China, while residing in the host nation. If *China Roots* offers an image of the Chinese migrant who seems unable or unwilling to transcend his position as a diasporic subject on the margins, this image is countered by another in *Chinese Jetsam* of the immigrant protagonist who asserts his claim to a Straits Chinese identity, and who struggles to make his relocation to the new territory work for him.

The literary constructions of Low and Bheng Khay have thus shown how complex the concept of a Chinese identity is, and how precarious and fractured the definition of such an identity can be. It could be argued that this representation of the Chinese migrant, much like the 'postcolonial transnational subject' that Aiwah Ong describes in her essay 'On the Edge of Empires', calls into question 'not only the stability in cultural identity, but also ties to a single nation-state, or even to a single imagined community.'⁴ Where the early diaspora is concerned, what seems clear from the narratives discussed in Chapter Four is that the notion of a 'pregiven' or fixed cultural identity is continually being deconstructed and de-stabilised. Indeed, as the chapters in this thesis have both outlined and qualified, the question of "Chineseness" can change, and is, without a doubt, capable of undergoing further alteration.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Aiwah Ong, *op. cit.*, p.747.

In the years following the early diaspora, the issue of “Chineseness” and Chinese identity continues to be formulated as a question of coping with change and alterity. In the last section of Chapter Two, I discussed the development of the diaspora beyond the nineteenth century, where the picture of the China-born as *huaqiaos* or sojourners, was gradually superseded by another picture of them as settlers. Using the discussion in Chapter Two as a point of reference, this section will demonstrate, by way of conclusion, the evolution of the diasporic subject in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and its significance on the construction of a Chinese identity. Vijay Mishra writes about the old Indian diaspora of exclusivism and the ‘new diaspora of late capital’ as being ‘two interlinked but historically separated diasporas’.⁵ Following Mishra, I argue that the early Chinese diaspora that began as part of British imperialism, and the diaspora of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries that emerged from a context of transnationalism and advanced capitalism, can likewise be perceived as two historically separate but interrelated communities. What the following section aims to do therefore, is to highlight some of the historical and socio-economic conditions that shaped the formation of the late twentieth century diasporic subject, and briefly explore the interconnections between the early diaspora and the one at present. The discussion also raises questions about the (re)negotiations and (re)articulations of a Chinese identity, and in doing so, suggests further lines of enquiry from which to theorise the diaspora.

⁵ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.*, pp.421-422.

***Taikongren*: The Transnational Chinese Subject.**

In recent years, a growing field of interest is that of the *taikongren*, a new emergent Chinese identity that has evolved from the late twentieth and twenty-first century diaspora. The term '*taikongren*' is a vernacular coinage that sums up the socio-economic changes that have taken place, and which continue to take place in the diaspora today. In its English translation, *taikongren* means 'astronaut',⁶ and this appellation, I argue, presents an embodiment of the contemporary Chinese migrant. The *taikongren*, as described by Aiwah Ong in his essay entitled 'On the Edge of Empire: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora',⁷ conjures up an image of an astronaut who, from a choice determined by economics, flits amongst various nation-states, and whose life is shaped by cultural hybridity and a plurality of geographical locales.

Apparently a term of Hong Kong origin, the *taikongren* has been known to exist since the 1960s and, according to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, had become popular by the 1990s.⁸ Usually of the male gender, the Chinese astronaut refers to a Chinese subject who seeks residential rights in Western countries in order to search for economic opportunities, as well as to escape anticipated political upheavals, as in the case of Hong Kong's reversion to China in 1997. Many of these *taikongrens* are entrepreneurs and professionals who seek a flexible position for themselves and their

⁶ The terms '*taikongren*' and 'Chinese astronaut' will be used interchangeably throughout the conclusion.

⁷ Aiwah Ong, 'On the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora', *Positions* 1(3), Winter, 1993.

⁸ Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, ' "Astronaut Wives" and "little Dragons": Identity Negotiations by Diasporic Chinese Women in Two Popular Novels of the 1980s' in Wang Ling-chi and Wang Gungwu (eds.), *The Chinese Diaspora: Selected Essays Volume 1*, Singapore: Times Academic Press,

families in the global sphere, where they negotiate their sense of belonging between different nation-states. For instance, while the *taikongren* continues to work in Hong Kong or China, “he” would simultaneously have the family installed in safe havens in Australia, Canada, the United States, or Great Britain. The typical, if not exclusive living arrangement for the astronaut individual, according to Wong, ‘is for the husband to continue working in Hong Kong or Taiwan while the wife takes the children to establish residency in the potential safe haven.’⁹ Family ties are then maintained by the endless orbiting and the frequent back-and-forth flying between the subject’s various states of residence. To that extent, the late twentieth century diasporic subject is like the China-born Chinese of the early diaspora, who adopts a life of sojourn, migration and dispersion. At the same time, the situation of the twentieth century diasporic subject is also quite distinct from that of the early China-borns in that the flight for the *taikongren* is not typically one-way, but multi-directional, and dispersed across a plurality of geopolitical locations.

The trope of the *taikongren*, or what could be described as the transnational Chinese migrant, is also embodied in the diasporic subject from Singapore, who is likewise a cosmopolitan subject, constantly “in orbit”, and who shuttles between different states, albeit for different reasons, and in different political circumstances. Thus, unlike the *taikongren* from Hong Kong, the Chinese astronaut from Singapore may not necessarily be motivated by the search for political refuge, but for economic opportunities. In the text *Alien Asian* for instance – an autobiographical account of a Chinese-Singaporean in America - the writer Simon Tay writes of diasporic

1998, pp.133-151.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.134.

individuals who traverse different zones of time and space, who are not intent on settling permanently at any one given time nor place, but who would rather go anywhere, everywhere, provisionally. Ken in the novel, for instance, was born into a Chinese family in Malaysia. He has lived half his life in Singapore, where he went to secondary school and college, and subsequently moved to North America when he was nineteen. Some time later, he returned to Singapore to do his Masters, and moved to Guelph in Canada thereafter. He furthered his studies in Miami, Oregon, and Boston, before taking up a post in Harvard, '[a]nd so he moved from the centre of the continent to cities on almost every coast; the South, Pacific Northwest and the new England East Coast.'¹⁰ This sketch of a life shaped by cultural hybridity and a plurality of geographical spaces serves as an example of the identity of the *taikongren*. Ken is the embodiment of the transnational diasporic subject who, as James Clifford suggests, 'is forever crossing, traversing, mixing, translating linguistically and culturally.'¹¹ As a *taikongren*, Ken epitomises an increasingly prevalent type of Chinese cosmopolitan figure who thrusts himself into the international global sphere, and who chooses provisionality and multiplicity as a mode of existence. In this context, Ken could be said to personify a Chinese identity in intersecting national and transnational political areans, for whom the prospect of staying abroad for prolonged periods is real, 'even if seldom discussed'¹²

The new, enabling global environment that is dominated by technological advances in communications and mercantile capitalism provides a crucial context within which the *taikongren* such as Ken emerges and is articulated. Tay in *Alien*

¹⁰ Simon Tay, *Alien Asian*, Singapore: Landmark Books: 1997, p.24.

¹¹ James Clifford, 'Sites of Crossing: Border and Diaspora in Late 20th Century Expressive Culture' in

Asian portrays an affluent diasporic population in America, and depicts the ease with which the subject of the late twentieth century has traversed the Pacific. He describes Singapore as a 'home of MNCs, fast-food joints and malls' and as a community marked by 'growing affluence and cheaper airfares'.¹³ The diaspora, as depicted in the text, is therefore also a society where modern advances in communications and transportation facilitate the movement of individuals across the globe.

Enabled by a culture of high technologies, migration for the contemporary Chinese subject is possible in greater numbers and at greater speed. The twentieth century *taikongrens*, as the sociologist Kwok Bun Chan has pointed out, are 'much more mobile, resource-rich, and resilient than their nineteenth century predecessors.'¹⁴ Tay in *Alien Asian*, illustrates how the late twentieth century diaspora is one that operates within an electronic medium, where individuals communicate by mail and 'increasing numbers by e-mail'.¹⁵ It is a society governed by what Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge describe as 'a complex transnational flow of media images and messages.'¹⁶ The diasporic individual in *Alien Asian* is the modern-day *taikongren*, who is socialised primarily within a cultural of global technologies. It is a culture, as the narrator suggests, 'of differentiated media', where the movement of the diasporic individual across nations is simulated and further enhanced by 'remote control' and

Cultural Currents 1. Program for Cultural Studies, East-West Centre, 1993, p.3.

¹² Simon Tay, *op. cit.*, p.39.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁴ Kwok Bun Chan, 'A Family Affair: Migration, Dispersal, and the Emergent Identity of the Chinese Cosmopolitan' in *Diaspora* 6:2, 1997, pp.195-211.

¹⁵ Simon Tay, *op. cit.*, p.283.

¹⁶ Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, 'On Moving Targets' in *Public Culture* 2, 1989, p.iii.

'cable television.'¹⁷ It is a society, as Tay describes, where '[y]ou never really say goodbye to anyone that you want to keep in touch with.'¹⁸

It is within this culture of high technologies, as represented by the availability of satellite media, cost-efficient transportation, and electronic communication, that the contemporary diasporic subject or the *taikongren* emerges. Enabled by a technology-intensive culture which Spivak perceives as the 'medium of "microelectronic transnationalism",¹⁹ the *taikongren* is constantly "in orbit", maximising economic gains at home and abroad, while seeking at the same time a flexible position for themselves and their families in the global sphere. Indeed, the *taikongren* such as Ken, is caught in what Rouse describes as the 'transnational migrant circuit',²⁰ where money, people, and technology circulate, and where an individual's existence is articulated in the structure of this circuitry. Kwok describes this phenomenon as the emergence of 'the Chinese cosmopolitan', 'the new overseas Chinese, the middle class, the transnational Chinese bourgeoisie', who is constituted within 'an ever-expanding transnational field.'²¹

Economists and sociologists have cast their eyes on the emergence of this new Chinese middle class. Richard Robison and David S.G. Goodman, for instance, highlight the emergence of the modern-day *taikongren*, or what they have described as 'the new rich' in Asia. The words 'new' and 'rich', they argue, 'are perhaps the most

¹⁷ Simon Tay, *op. cit.*, pp.77-78.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.283.

¹⁹ Spivak Gayatri, 'Who Claims Alterity' in *Remaking History*, B. Kruger and P. Mariani (ed.), Seattle Bay, 1989, p.276.

²⁰ Roger Rouse, 'Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism' in *Diaspora* 1, 1991, p.14.

²¹ Kwok Bun Chan, *op. cit.*, p.196.

appropriate to the new social strata of wealth'²² that have emerged in society today. According to them, Singapore's economic development coupled with its political stability has set in motion important social changes, which include a rise in material living standards and the emergence of a substantial 'new class' of professional workers.

It is this emerging set of social and economic conditions that informs *Alien Asian* and the majority of stories that have emerged about the late twentieth century diasporic individual. In *Raffles Place Ragtime* for instance, a novel by another Singaporean writer Philip Jeyaretnam, the protagonist, Vincent, describes a generation of affluent Singaporeans as the 'go-getters', the 'hard-bitten hard-nosed types'.²³ The novel depicts a late twentieth century Singapore, where individuals vie to survive and succeed in a "cut-throat" market society. Rich and prominent, Vincent's future in-laws could be described as *taikongrens*, as reflected through their lifestyle of frequent travels, and their routine of spending a month every year in London, where they have a flat.²⁴ The Lims are part of a "supercharged" society that runs on high technology in the workplace, and on luxury Western consumer items such as Mercedes Benzes, European wine, and a multi-national corporation network.

²² Richard Robison and David S.G. Goodman (ed.), *The New Rich in Asia*, p.6. Robison and Goodman provide a comprehensive sociological study of the new rich in Asia, with special reference to the Singapore model. According to their study, the demise of colonialism in Singapore and the advent of self-government in 1965 brought better opportunities for economic growth in the service and manufacturing sectors. This socio-economic context provided the impetus for the emergence of a sizeable, new wealthy segment of society that asserted themselves economically and culturally within the nation-state. For more on the subject read Robison and Goodman, pp.19-45. See also Lever-Tracy, Constance, and David Ip, 'Diaspora Capitalism and the Homeland: Australian Chinese Networks into China.' *Diaspora* 5, 1996, pp.239-273, and by the same authors, *The Chinese Diaspora and Mainland China: An Emerging Economic Synergy*, London: Macmillan Press, New York: St. Martin's press, 1996. Focusing on the emergence of the transnational Chinese entrepreneurs, Tracy, Constance, and Ip provide an analysis of the economic links between China and the Chinese diaspora, as well as a sociological study of the transnational diaspora economy.

²³ Philip Jeyaretnam, *Raffles Place Ragtime*, Singapore: Times Books International, 1988, p.5.

Concepts such as the 'middle classes' and the 'new rich' can thus be used to describe the diasporic Chinese at the end of the twentieth century. Like *taikongrens* everywhere, the *taikongren* in Singapore is marked by levels of affluence that are manifest in new lifestyles and new cultural patterns. Tay writes of an ever-growing number of Chinese-Singaporeans who spend a large part of their lives outside Singapore and in the international arena, travelling across various states and continents. He speaks of a community of Singaporeans residing in America who represent 'the new Singaporean living abroad: with education and money to afford more than scruffy, poor neighbourhoods that most newcomers make do with when they arrive.'²⁵ Karen and Linus in the novel for instance, are the epitome of the new Singaporeans; they are 'well settled, with a BMW and an Audi, a golf club membership, a good Montessori school for the kids, part-time help to clean the house and keep an eye on the children after school'.²⁶ As a class, the *taikongrens* are therefore the professional middle classes, the owners of capital, and the possessors of managerial and technical skills. They contribute, as Tay suggests, to the growing numbers who 'have entered the ranks of professionals in computing, law, accounting, engineering and even classical music.'²⁷ Differentiated by education, lifestyle, and wealth, these contemporary diasporic Chinese live within their own middle-class enclaves, and could be perceived as a class apart from the rest of the diaspora. The protagonist, Vincent, in *Raffles Place Ragtime*, for example, comes from a working class family of food hawkers and stands in contrast with his socially prominent *taikongren* in-laws. In a sense, it could be said that this disparity between the classes is

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.16.

²⁵ Simon Tay, *op. cit.*, p.39.

a replay of the gap between the well-to-do Straits-born Chinese and working class China-born Chinese of the earlier era.

Practially all the literary works concerning the diaspora of the late twentieth century concentrate in one way or another on the emergence of the affluent *taikongren*. Besides Tay's *Alien Asian*, the short story 'Mandarin' by the Singaporean writer Gopal Baratham presents another literary construction of the twentieth century diasporic Chinese. The protagonist, Yuen, for instance, embodies the familiar characteristics of the modern-day Chinese astronaut. In a lifestyle similar to that of the characters in *Alien Asian*, his economic achievements allow him to participate in this transnational moment of the new rich. His affluence, Yuen confesses, satisfies his weakness for 'new things ... houses, cars, boats ...', and apparently, even women.²⁸ The transnational diasporic experience is recreated through Yuen's eyes. Leaving behind his wife Suan and daughter Ee Lan, Yuen travels around the world for purposes of both business and pleasure. With his frequent back-and-forth flying, he takes readers through different continents as he traces his life across a plurality of geographic places, from Hong Kong, to New England, to Cape Cod, America, Japan, and Macau. The many women in Yuen's life are testimonials of his endless "orbiting". The women with whom he has had affairs are scattered among the plurality of places to which he has travelled. There is, for instance, his first mistress, Yoke, a Hong Konger who lives in New England, Li Xi from China, and Clara Concaecio from Macau whom he calls 'the little portuguese.'²⁹ Although this susceptibility to infidelity applies equally to either

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.38.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.17.

²⁸ Gopal Baratham, 'Mandarin' in *Memories that Glow in the Dark. A Collection of Short Stories*, Singapore: Pipaltee Publishings, 1995, p.74.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p.76.

spouse, in this case, it is the husband's extramarital affairs which testify to an apparent emptiness of marital life of the contemporary *taikongren*.

In a sense, Yuen's lifestyle bears a certain resemblance to the existence of the nineteenth century China-born Chinese who leaves his spouse, children, and extended family to venture into the new world in order to seek better opportunities and new fortunes for the family left behind. Separated from the family, Yuen plays out his role and discharges his responsibility as a husband and father from a distance. While he travels the world, his daughter Ee Lan is away at Harvard, while his wife, Suan, is left alone in New England. Yuen could be described as the 'lone migrant', a phrase Kwok Bun Chan uses to refer to the twentieth century Chinese individual who separates himself from the family to procure a better future and life for all.³⁰ Semantically, the word *taikongren*, which refers to the idea of an astronaut on one level, also serves on another level, as a literal description of the transnational diasporic migrant who "orbits" the earth without the presence of the wife or family. Kwok indicates that the term '*taikongren*' is made up of three ideographs: '*tai*' which means 'wife', '*kong*' which denotes emptiness or solitariness, and '*ren*' which means 'person'.³¹ Placed together, the term *taikongren* describes the solitary existence of the Chinese astronaut. Ironically, as Aiwah Ong points out, the diasporic subjects's strategy to mesh individual and family interests, and capital maximisation, has contributed to the dispersion and even fragmentation of the family. Away from his family, Yuen is the epitome of Kwok's 'lone migrant'. He ekes out his *taikongren*'s existence in a 'male bachelor' society, finding himself vulnerable to the vices of having extramarital affairs

³⁰ Kwok Bun Chan, *op. cit.*, pp.200-201.

³¹ *ibid.*, p.202.

and visiting prostitutes, all of which 'Suan knew nothing about.'³² The existence of the Chinese astronaut, Kwok argues, is a familial and marital phenomenon that is linked with a host of social problems and issues, and of which 'spousal infidelity is one'.³³ In 'Mandarin', Yuen's prolonged separation from the family challenges his ability to confine sexuality within the marriage. In a sense, Yuen leads a double-life, where, on the one hand, he is the so-called family man in his life with Suan and Ee Lan, but, on the other, he is also the carefree bachelor *taikongren*; a life, as Yuen admits, which the rest of the family '[have] no inkling of.'³⁴

As Yuen in 'Mandarin' has demonstrated, the *taikongren*'s capacity for leading different lives, for dominating or even monopolising economic sectors, and its seeming inclination to de-territorialise, and merely to sojourn without commitment to any host country, evokes the figure of the nineteenth century Chinese sojourner. In a manner reminiscent of the large-scale migration of Chinese people to the early diaspora, the twentieth century diasporic Chinese are likewise dispersed over different geographical locations. However, unlike their China-born ancestors, migration for the *taikongren* is no longer a "semi-voluntary" strategy that is undertaken as a result of natural or social calamities in the place of origin. Neither is it looked upon negatively as an undesirable consequence.³⁵ Rather, migration for the twentieth century *taikongren* is largely voluntary, a positive act, and a strategy adopted on purpose to procure a better future and life. Referring to Linus and Karen, the narrator in *Alien Asian* says, 'Linus had secured a job with a bank based in London and so they switched continents again. ...

³² Gopal Baratham, *op. cit.*, p.74.

³³ Kowk Bun Chan, *op. cit.*, p.203.

³⁴ Gopal Baratham, *op. cit.*, p.74.

³⁵ Read Chapter Two for the meanings of 'yimin', 'nanmin', and the negative connotations associated with migration for the nineteenth century China-born Chinese.

The move was hectic but the job and conditions for them in England were good.³⁶ Thus, unlike the “lone” nineteenth century China-born Chinese who leaves his family only as a last resort, migration for Linus and Karen is a family affair, and one that is envisioned in positive terms.

Indeed, as a social phenomenon, the contemporary diasporic subject can be seen as an alternate form of the early diaspora. For the nineteenth century China-borns, the eventual decision to settle in the diaspora was often guilt-ridden, and marked by a constant nostalgia for the homeland in China, as seen through the protagonist in *China Roots*. The contemporary *taikongren*, however, is not the nineteenth century China-born *huaqiao* who is forever yearning to return to China, to “go home” in mind or in body. Rather, the *taikongren* is much like the early Straits-born Chinese, who have long since overcome or exorcised their desire to find some kind of affinity with ancestral China, or to return to some “original” homeland. In fact, the resulting effect of the *taikongren*’s endless crossing of different space and time is that often, many times over, the notion of “home” is never a simple geopolitical space, or for that matter a single geographical territory.

Robin Cohen has argued that the bonds between members of diaspora in the transnational moment no longer have to be cemented by exclusive territorial claims,³⁷ and as a transnational subject, the *taikongren* de-stabilises ties to a single nation-state. In ‘Mandarin’, Baratham writes not so much of the homeless diasporic subject as of the diasporic subject with different homes: Yuen’s home of origin in Hong Kong, his

³⁶ Simon Tay, *op. cit.*, p.284.

³⁷ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, London: UCL Press, 1997, p.196.

home in New England in America to which he migrated, the home in Cape Cod, and the home in Cambridge. Yuen, as the epitome of the transnational diasporic subject, owes loyalty neither to China, nor to the other territories to which he frequently travels. Even at the end of the narrative, there is no clear indication as to a specific geographical place or territory which he perceives as “home” and of which he is a citizen. In fact, the narrative ends on an ambivalent note, with an elderly Yuen sitting stoically by a lake: ‘[r]ight now, I will sit back and watch the sun drive the waves across the face of the lake’.³⁸ It remains unclear even at the end of the story, whether Yuen is speaking from his home in America, or his home of origin in Hong Kong. For him, the meaning of “home” can no longer be perceived as a fixed physical reality, but rather as something indeterminate, provisional, and tentative.

Likewise, in *Alien Asian*, the notion of “home” for the Chinese individual is never a specific geopolitical location or space. With Bryan, for example, his finding and buying a “home” is determined by where the family can enjoy a bourgeois lifestyle, and where “world-class” education can be found for the children. He opts to relocate for the moment to America, only because ‘working and living in America has both personal and professional rewards.’³⁹ Like the rest of the characters in the narrative, Bryan orders his life according to the economic opportunities offered by Singapore, America, or wherever he finds in the cosmopolitan world that is rewarding to practise his talents. “Home”, for the contemporary Chinese migrant such as Bryan, does not necessarily have to be here, or there, but is, tentatively, potentially, anywhere and everywhere.

³⁸ Gopal Baratham, *op. cit.*, p.82.

³⁹ Simon Tay, *op. cit.*, p.190.

In *Alien Asian*, the idea of “home” is also constructed not only as multiple, but portable. For Karen and Linus, everything and anything that constitutes their home is transported in one container and shipped from one country to another. As a result, their “home” in America is ‘not so different from the apartment they used to have in Singapore, an ultra-modern condominium just off Orchard Road.’⁴⁰ The similarity of each home is compounded by the furniture that they have had transported in the container, ‘chairs, dining table, shelving unit and desk: all this and more had come with them from Singapore.’⁴¹ Following their stay in America, when the family is on the move again and this time to London, the “home” and furniture are once more transported across the globe. Again, as the narrator writes, Karen and Linus ‘packed and shipped everything over; this meant that items like their table, desk, and kitchen appliances originally from Singapore, had been more than half-way around the world.’⁴² “Home” for the transnational diasporic subject such as Karen and Linus, is perceived as something compact and moveable. It is this condition of the late twentieth century *taikongren* that is akin to the image Shirley Lim has delineated of the diasporic exile, who carries his or her sense of removal ‘like a snail with its heavy-horned shell.’⁴³

Karen and Linus, in transporting themselves, their family, and their home from country to country, conjure up the image of a snail constantly on the move, carrying with it its shell or “home”. The only difference is that the *taikongren*’s condition does

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.34.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*, p.284.

⁴³ Shirley Lim, ‘Tongue and Root: Language in Exile’ in *The Pen Is Mightier than the Sword*, London: Skoob Books Publishing Ltd., 1994, p.35.

not presuppose a sense of exile or its negative connotations of dispossession and displacement. Even though the *taikongren* in hypermobility is perceived as being disarticulated from any one nationality or territory, it is, interestingly, not represented as a kind of schizophrenic figure compounded with a multiplicity of homes and identities. Neither is the *taikongren* the classic and much theorised “uprooted” migrant of the early diaspora, who, like Bheng Khay in Chapter Four, for instance, is sad, disgruntled, and alienated. Rather, the twentieth century *taikongren*, as reflected through Karen and Linus, is defined as a source of strength in its ability to adapt to different environments. The late twentieth century diasporic Chinese, in other words, is no longer associated exclusively with the notion of being in diaspora as a forced displacement, alienation, and loss. As the narrator in *Alien Asian* suggests, Karen and Linus ‘did not know how long they would be there, when they would come back’. Yet, Karen, ‘stylish and assured in her elegant black dress, seemed very comfortable with this uncertainty, the quintessential new Singaporean abroad.’⁴⁴ ‘Mandarin’, *Raffles Ragtime*, and *Alien Asian*, as literary constructions of the twentieth century *taikongren*, thus stand in a relation of difference to the earlier diasporic writings of the China-born Chinese who live by the saying *luo di gui gen* (fallen leaves return to the roots). Instead, the late twentieth century *taikongren* live by what Kwok Bun Chan has described as *zhonggen*, which is a term that refers to the idea of multiple rootedness or multiple consciousness.⁴⁵ The word *zhong* refers to the idea of ‘multiple’, and the word *gen* literally means ‘roots’. Placed together, the idea of *zhonggen* suggests the diasporic subject’s multiple and diverse “roots”. The *taikongren* who lives by *zhonggen* does not appear to be settling down and “sinking roots” in any one single

⁴⁴ Simon Tay, *op. cit.*, p.284.

⁴⁵ Kwok Bun Chan, *op. cit.*, p.205.

place or at any particular time. He is not tied to one origin, one home, nor one territory, but rather, to many.

The concept of *zhonggen*, and the apparent mobility of the *taikongren*, therefore suggest a notion of migration that is no longer contained within a unidirectional pattern or movement. Rather, this static conceptualisation of migration as unidirectional is being replaced by what Cohen terms as ‘asynchronous, transversal flows.’⁴⁶ The *taikongrens*’ “orbit” is multi-directional and involves sojourns, transits, and temporary relocations instead of permanent settlement, permanent residency, and citizenship. This erratic and temporal pattern of migration stems from an emerging phenomenon that is enabled by the increasing efficiencies of globalism and modern technologies. As Iain Chambers suggests, ‘migration involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. ... Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming ... becomes an impossibility.’⁴⁷ The identity of the *taikongren* is appropriate to the work of Chambers, whose notion of migration has come to occupy a place in Diaspora Studies. According to him, the migration experience is a fundamental dimension that necessarily presupposes any diasporic situation. He argues that the condition of the diasporic experience is dependent on the transitory movement of a people that is based on a “travelling” culture, made increasingly possible by the advancement of modern technologies. If the *taikongren* is an embodiment of such a culture, then what is striking about Chamber’s conceptualisation is the apparent ease within which the migrant subject is able to move in and out of various cultures at will. This produces a diasporic identity that is based

⁴⁶ Robin Cohen, *op. cit.*, p.128.

⁴⁷ Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture and Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p.3.

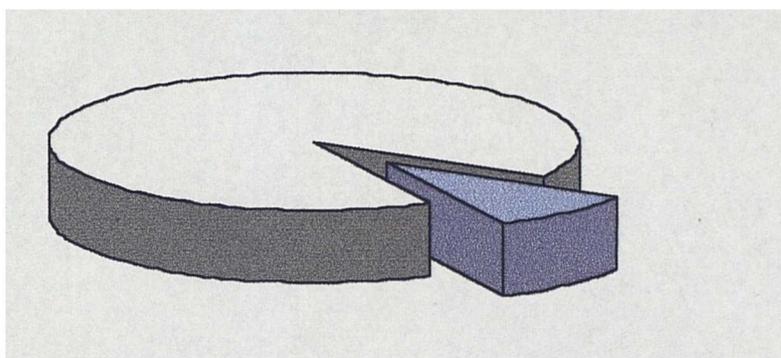
on sojourn rather than permanent settlement, on temporal rather than permanent dwelling, and therefore, by implication, on shifting, rather than fixed identities. The corporeal presence of the Chinese astronaut in transit is thus never stable or permanent, to the extent that the prospect for any return and “homecoming” may be impossible. The astronaut’s meandering journey, and re-rooting is encroached by a compelling sphere of dis-identification, whereby the Chinese subject is always mediating its position apart from a home.

The movement from Low’s *Chinese Jetsam* to Tay’s *Alien Asian* suggests therefore a rethinking of the concept of “Chineseness” and “home” within the diaspora. It illustrates the changing identity of the diasporic Chinese in Singapore over the generations, from the period of the early 1800s to the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For the China-borns who left their village to seek a fortune, ties and loyalty to China were strong. However, for the Straits-borns in the community that had settled in Singapore, ties to China were distant and much weaker. This was even more for the descendants of both groups who are born and bred in Singapore, for whom China is now a foreign country, as is Malaya, which Singapore was once a part of. A more in-depth discussion of the *taikongren* and the diasporic writings that I have mentioned in this conclusion is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, what the writings in this section have shown is that the question of articulating a diasporic Chinese identity for the diaspora, even in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, continues to be a dynamic process of change. Indeed, when we compare the situation of the post-1950s diaspora to that of the pre-1950s early diaspora, what can be observed is that the question of being Chinese for either diaspora in the two phases has always been a destabilising and changing one. My thesis, to this extent, attempted to show that the

dispersion of the Chinese people from China is not a story about a non-fractured, homogeneous community, but a set of intersecting and interlocking stories of several communities. From the Straits-born Chinese, and China-born Chinese *huaqiaos* and *sinkeh*s in the old days, to the late twentieth century Chinese-Singaporean and the transnational *taikongren*s today, the experience of being in diaspora and the process of articulating a Chinese identity, remain a subjective and evolving one.

Appendix 1

Composition of Chinese Community in Singapore in 1881



■ Straits Born (9.5% - less than 10,000)

□ China Born (90.5%)

Source: Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, Singapore: Landmark Books, 1998, p.202.

Appendix 2

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF SINGAPORE'S TOTAL POPULATION BY ETHNIC GROUP

YEAR	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION				
	POPULATION	CHINESE	MALAY	INDIAN	OTHERS	TOTAL
1824	10,683	31.0	60.2	7.1	1.7	100
1830	16,634	39.4	45.9	11.5	3.2	100
1836	29,984	45.9	41.7	9.9	2.6	100
1840	35,389	50.0	37.3	9.5	3.1	100
1849	52,891	52.9	32.2	11.9	3.0	100
1860	81,734	61.2	19.8	15.9	3.1	100
1871	97,111	56.2	26.9	11.8	5.0	100
1891	181,602	67.1	19.7	8.8	4.3	100
1901	226,842	72.1	15.8	7.8	4.3	100
1911	303,321	72.4	13.8	9.2	4.7	100
1921	418,358	75.3	12.8	7.7	4.2	100
1931	557,745	75.1	11.7	9.1	4.2	100
1947	938,144	77.8	12.1	7.4	2.8	100
1957	1,445,929	75.4	13.6	8.6	2.4	100
1970	2,074,507	76.2	15.0	7.0	1.8	100
1980	2,413,945	76.9	14.6	6.4	2.1	100

'Total population' includes non-citizens and non-permanent residents in the post-independence censuses. 'Malays' is a generic category for various indigenous peoples of the Malay Archipelago. 'Indians' from 1970 onwards, include Sri Lankans or Ceylonese, previously classified under 'Others'. Sources: Cheng (1985); Saw (1970); Singapore Census of Population 1990, Demographic Characteristics, 1992.

Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, Singapore: Landmark Books, 1998, p.200.

Appendix 3

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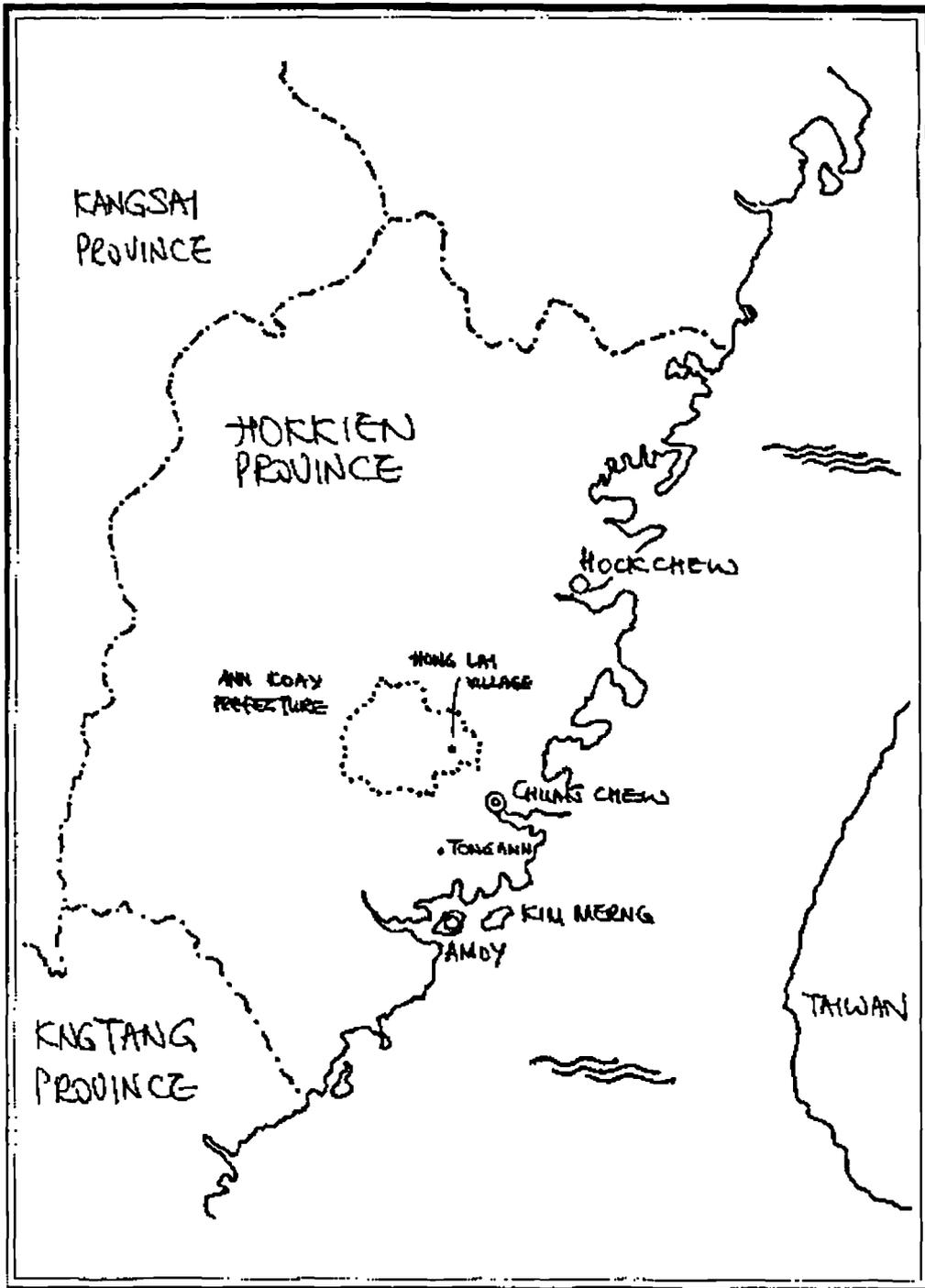
Plans and Estimates and specifications on application.

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Appendix 5



Sketch map of Hokkien Province as Beng Khay knew it, with place names in the Hokkien dialect.

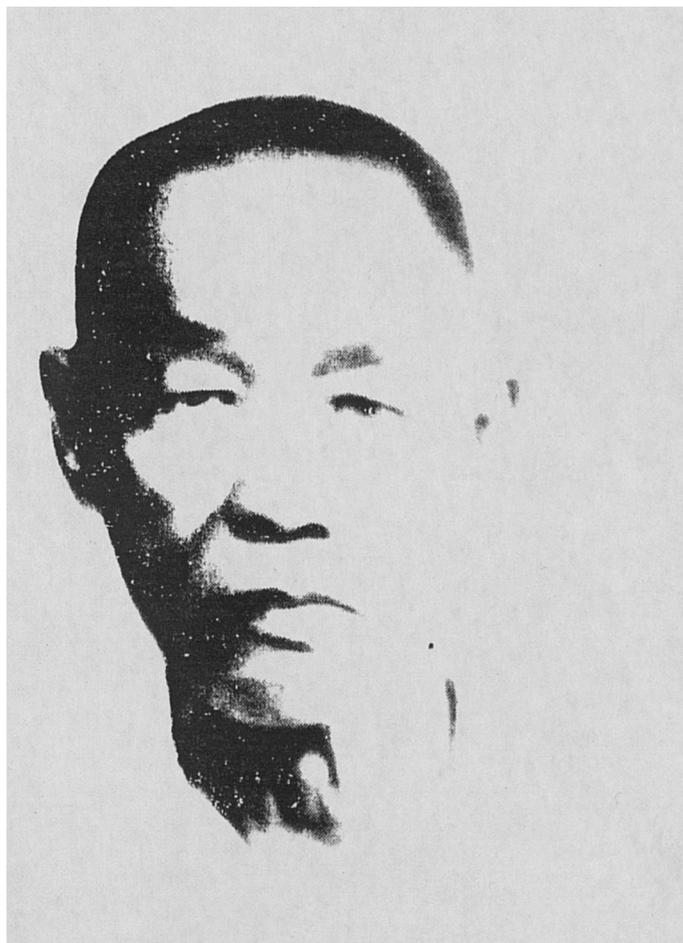
Appendix 6



Rows of shophouses on wide streets in certain parts of the town were used as accommodation for the migrant labourers.

The lodging houses were dark and smelly inside. The coolies slept on two tiers of rough wooden platforms in narrow spaces. When Beng Khay first entered a lodging house a few men were resting and watching him lethargically from the shadows of the bunk.



Appendix 7

Beng Khay, the author's grandfather.

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