

# Homeland and Ancestor - Social Identity and National Consciousness of Malaysia Chinese

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## Abstract

This article discusses how the Chinese who have lived in Malaysia for generations treat their national identity, citizenship, social identity, and explore the various differences between Malaysian Chinese and Chinese in China. Especially the new thoughts differences, and similarities that those Malaysian Chinese who choose to "return" to China to live have developed after coming into contact with Chinese society and culture. Through an interview with a Malaysian Chinese living in Iwu, Chekiang Province, and a systematic analysis of existing academic materials, this article will discuss those differences, including how the identity of "overseas Chinese" differ from "ethnic Chinese", how Chinese living in a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia is different from a single-ethnic country like China, and how the Chinese dialect influences and inherits Chinese national consciousness.

**Keywords:** Chinese Dialect, Malaysia Chinese, Social Identity, Nation-State, National Consciousness

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## Introduction

Malaysian Chinese have a long history. As early as the 15th century, after Zheng He's voyages to the West (鄭和下西洋) organized by the Emperor of the Ming Dynasty of China, a large number of coastal residents of China, forced by their livelihoods or in search of more wealth, left their hometowns, sailed to sea, and settled in various locations in Southeast Asia, including today's Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore. As the British began to colonize Southeast Asia and the Qing Dynasty in China faced internal and external troubles in the late 19th century, more Chinese chose to "Ke Hoan(過番, go aboard)" and come to British colonies to work, mine minerals or serve on plantations. They mainly come from Fukien, Taiwan, and Canton Province in southern China, speak different languages: Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew or Hakka, and are divided into different Chinese communities based on their mother tongue. After the independence of Malaysia and Singapore, the status and influence of the Chinese in the local area continued to change, and eventually became an indispensable and important part of the multi-ethnic country of Malaysia (Lee, 2009a).

Malaysian Chinese, as an ethnic entity, have always been the focus of social research due to their special status. In Malaysia, they are one of the many ethnic groups, but they belong to the same nation as the majority of China's population. Therefore, their relationship, identity, and cultural belonging with their motherland Malaysia, and China's Chinese is an issue worth exploring. In recent years, with the rapid development of China's economy, many Malaysian Chinese have "returned to their roots" and either chosen to settle in China or come to their ancestral hometowns to look for family relatives. As members of the broad "same nation", the differences between China's Chinese and Malaysian Chinese constitute a new research topic.

As an important basis for the research and conclusions of this article, we interviewed Mr. Anderson, who currently lives in Iwu, Chekiang Province. He is a young entrepreneur from Kuantan City, Malaysia. He came to Chekiang Province with his China wife several years ago to settle and run a business. His great-grandfather

left hometown - Putian, Fukien Province, China - before World War II and settled in Malaysia, making him a typical Malaysian Chinese who can be used as a research subject. Through interviews with him and combined with academic materials, this article will comprehensively analyze the situation and differences of Malaysian Chinese in the following three topics: the use of Chinese dialects by Malaysian Chinese; the cognitive and social differences between the multi-ethnic country of Malaysia and the single-ethnic-dominated country of China; and the interaction and connection between the dual identities of Malaysian Chinese as "Chinese" and Malaysian citizens;

## The Heritage of Home Voice: Daily Use of Chinese Dialects by Malaysian Chinese

The two provinces of Canton and Fukien, due to their geographical location on the southern coast of China and close to Southeast Asia, have become important source areas for overseas Chinese since the Age of Discovery. In addition, in the century after the Opium War, most of the port cities that were forcibly opened or occupied by Western colonists were in these two provinces: such as Chinchew, Canton City, and Hong Kong. Therefore, these two provinces have become an important source of immigrants, and the population with these two provinces as their ancestral home accounts for the vast majority of the Chinese population in Malaysia. Also brought with them by the immigrants were their dialects: Foochow (福州話), Hokkien (閩南話), Teochew (潮州話), Hakka (客家話), Hailam(海南話) and Cantonese(廣州話) which make up the "6 major sub ethnic groups" of Malaysian Chinese. Among them, the Hokkien and Cantonese-speaking groups are the largest and have the most extensive influence (Wang, 2016). Nowadays, on the streets of Kuala Lumpur or Penang, one can communicate freely using Hokkien or Cantonese without any language barriers. Unlike China, in Malaysia, people form communities based on Chinese dialects. People whose mother tongue is the same dialect have better

feelings for each other and have closer communication (Puah & Ting, 2014). With the widespread popularization of Mandarin, such obvious distinctions basically no longer appear in mainland China.

### ***A Study on the Importance of Dialects Among Malaysian Chinese: For Culture Heritage***

In her work, Brenda J. Allen emphasized the importance of differences, pointing out that even within the same or similar ethnic groups, specific differences within them should be valued, (2010, Pg 5) which is fully reflected on Malaysian Chinese. As mentioned earlier, among the Malaysian Chinese, dialects have great significance in cultural and social life. People who speak the same dialect and can communicate with each other in their mother tongue usually have ancestors from the same region of China and share a common regional culture, way of thinking, and clan heritage, so they are more likely to accept each other and work together. In the early days of Chinese immigration, immigrants faced an unfamiliar land, hostile indigenous people, and colonial governments. They had no choice but to help each other in order to finally take root in their new homeland. As a result, dialects became an important symbol for dividing groups, not only symbolizing the origin of the ethnic group but also an important communication tool (Ng & Chan, 2017). On the other hand, Lee's research (2009b) shows that in Malaysia, the most important indicator of whether a person is Chinese is whether he or she can speak "Sinophone", which means any dialect of Chinese in Malaysia.

Language are important tool for Malaysian Chinese to maintain their ethnic uniqueness. This is determined by the history and environment experienced by the Chinese in Malaysia. Since Malaysia's independence from British colonial rule, the United Malays National Organization has been in control of the Malaysian government and has continued to promote the nationalist policy of "Malay supremacy". In 1969, the fierce conflict between the Malays and ethnic minorities eventually triggered the "13 May Incident", resulting in bloody conflicts. In 1970, the government implemented the "National Culture Policy" and in 1971 promulgated the "New Economic Policy", which was essentially a policy to provide more development space for the Malays and plan to assimilate other ethnic groups into Malays culturally (Matondang, 2016). Under the increasing pressure of Malay nationalism, the Chinese are seeking to inherit and protect their own language and culture, maintain their independence, and oppose any assimilation. Therefore, Malaysian Chinese regard language as an important cultural carrier and rebellious spirit, and have formed a unique language and cultural consciousness.

### ***Reflection of Difference Between Malaysia Chinese and China Chinese in Language: Example From Interview***

During the interview, Anderson mentioned that his great-grandfather was from Putian, Fukian Province, and came to Malaysia with his fellow villagers to start a business and settle down during the wave of migration to Southeast Asia. In daily life, his family mostly speaks Hokkian, and the Chinese community where he lives in Kuantan also mainly speaks Hokkian. Although the local Chinese school he attended taught mainly Mandarin, he learned Hokkian from his family. He also mentioned that he learned Cantonese when he was a university student in Kuala Lumpur, so he has a good command of the three main Chinese dialects in Malaysia. Anderson's description also fully reflects the regional specificity of dialect boundaries: Hokkian is spoken in many Chinese communities in Kuantan, while Cantonese is spoken in Kuala Lumpur. In China, people are more likely to be divided by administrative boundaries, such as provinces, or other cultural characteristics, and as the government's efforts to promote Mandarin continue to deepen, more and more young people no longer speak their hometown dialects, people often define whether

a person is Chinese based on appearance, looks and origin rather than language. Anderson also mentioned that he found that in China, even in dialect areas, people will first use Mandarin instead of their own dialect to communicate with others, which is completely opposite in Malaysia. All of these constitute important differences in language among Malaysian Chinese, makes it an important observation point in differential research.

### ***Collision Between Multi-Ethnic State and Nation-State: The Main Differences In The Status and Role of Chinese In China and Malaysia***

Malaysia is obviously a multi-ethnic country. According to a statistic from Worldatlas (Sawe, 2019), among the various ethnic groups in Malaysia, Malays account for 50.1% of the population, Chinese account for 22.6%, other indigenous people account for 11.8%, and Indians account for 6.7%. These data show the diversity and complexity of Malaysia's ethnic composition. Although the Malays are often regarded as the majority of the country, they only make up half of the country's population and are far from meeting the standards of a nation-state. On the contrary, among China's 56 ethnic groups, the Han nationality accounts for more than 91% of the population, and the vast majority of other ethnic minorities do not exceed 1% (University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, 2014). This establishes the Han nationality as the dominant ethnic group in China, also with Chinese government intends to unite the entire country's population under one definition using the supra-ethnic concept of "ZhongHua MinZu (中华民族, Nation of China)" (Zhang, 1997), all of those making China an in fact "nation-state." In these two completely different societies, the situations, challenges, and national cognition faced by Chinese people are also completely different. Specifically, in Malaysia, the Chinese not only face the issue of multi-ethnic coexistence but also face challenges regarding cultural independence under the nationalist policies of the Malays in power.

### ***Coexistence and Integration of Chinese and Other Ethnic Groups In Multi-ethnic Context***

As the absolute subject of the country, in China, "Chinese" is almost synonymous with "China". In most cases, Chinese people regard the country as the complete property of their nation and do not need to deal with ethnic relations issues within their own country. In Malaysia, the number of Chinese is neither as small as in the United States and Australia to be considered a specific "immigrant group", nor as large as in China. As an important part of the Malaysian nation, the Chinese need to think about and practice not only their own society and lifestyle but also the will of the entire country. In this regard, the study by Ong et al. (2020) explored the "Enduring Values of Ethnic" of the Malaysian state to maintain ethnic harmony, that is, the government balances the needs and interests of each ethnic group and maintains social stability through ethnic consultation and overall planning. As the second largest ethnic group, Chinese society is inevitably closely related to these issues. This national environment also leads to different self-perceptions of Malaysian Chinese and Chinese. Anderson said in an interview that he would consider the Chinese to be "part of the many ethnic groups in Malaysia" and not much different from other ethnic groups, which further reflects the unique thinking and status of Malaysian Chinese in the multi-ethnic narrative.

With the continued existence of the Chinese community in Malaysia and the continuous formation of a multi-ethnic society, the cultures of various ethnic groups will inevitably blend and change. The cultural customs and ways of thinking of Malaysian Chinese have also changed due to the integration between ethnic groups. In his book (2010, pg 70), Allen mentioned the

phenomenon of racial integration and racial transformation in the United States when arguing for Race Matter. This challenged traditional racial concepts and proved that race is not fixed and unchanging, but fluid, and so is national culture. Among the Chinese in Malaysia, one can see rice dumplings filled with Indian curry fillings, and Peranakan cuisine, which is a fusion of Chinese and Malay eating habits (Zhang, 2024a). Finally, in terms of thinking, Malaysian Chinese, in a multi-ethnic environment, have formed a mindset that pays more attention to individual habits and differences. As Anderson mentioned in an interview, when he came to China, he felt uncomfortable with the Chinese people's unified fast-paced way of doing things and living, because in Malaysia, people are not required to do things at the same pace and efficiency, but are more likely to follow their own wishes.

### ***Under Malay Nationalism, Challenge of Malaysian Chinese to Maintain National Cultural Independence***

In sociology, race is often considered a product of "social construction," a man-made concept that serves a purpose, and therefore naturally requires proper maintenance and constant construction to maintain (Allen, 2010). Such concepts are reflected in the long-standing rivalry and complex relationship between the Malays and the Chinese in Malaysia. The inheritance and emphasis on traditional culture, customs, and language by Malaysian Chinese fundamentally stems from the Malay government's decades-long "Ketuanan Melayu" (Malay Hegemony) policy. From Malaya's independence in 1957 to the national election in 2018, the United Malays National Organisation has been in power in Malaysia for 61 years and has always pursued the ideology of Malay supremacy. The National Culture Policy (NCP) mentioned above, promulgated in 1971, is a concentrated embodiment of this idea. The NCP aims to establish a broad "Malaysian nation" in which all ethnic groups are integrated into the Malays, speak the Malay language, and accept Islamic traditions (Matondang, 2016). At the same time, "Malay Privilege" is ubiquitous in society, and Malays can use their privileges to "make life easier; it is easier to get around, to get what one wants, and to be treated acceptably." As Allen described (2010, pg 15).

Under such circumstances, to uphold their cultural heritage and national uniqueness, Malaysian Chinese have to attach great importance to their own cultural traditions and try their best to avoid the fate of assimilation. They attach great importance to the inheritance of language, clan rituals, and traditional festival celebrations, and insist on opening Chinese schools despite government pressure in order to gain independent education. At the end of our interview, Anderson pointed out that he believed the main difference between Malaysia and China was the religious atmosphere. In Malaysia, Islamic traditions and lifestyles are everywhere, and even non-Muslims have to follow them. This further reflects the challenges faced by Malaysian Chinese in maintaining their own independent culture. With modernization and the emergence of new subcultures, Chinese people living in China are experiencing a rapid process of accepting new things and improving or abandoning old cultures. But in Malaysia, the challenges brought by the multi-ethnic society make it impossible for them to update so quickly, and they can only protect and pass on their own culture as much as possible.

### **Chinese Race or Malaysian Citizen: Social Identity and Roots Seeking Vision of Chinese Malaysians**

The uniqueness of the social identity of the Chinese in Malaysia lies in the fact that they are the majority ethnic group of one country (China) but settled in another country. This gives them a complex social identity and self-perception: they are both citizens of Malaysia and members of the Malaysian nation, and they are

also Chinese, a group of people with the same roots as the majority ethnic group in China (Tan, 1997). Many Malaysian Chinese are sharing Anderson's idea: in their daily lives, they are just one of Malaysia's multi-ethnic groups and ordinary Malaysian citizens. However, when they see China making some construction achievements or further increasing its influence internationally, they also feel proud and realize that they are Chinese like those who have made great achievements. For China, these compatriots are both distant and close: they are minority, but they have the same faces and speak the same language. In recent years, with the development of transportation and Internet, many Malaysian Chinese have returned to Canton and Fukien Province - where their ancestors left - to find their roots, or to find kin with the same clan and same family name. For them, this is not just a search for roots, but also an attempt to find the true source of their own social identity.

### ***The Evolution and Status of Social Identity For Malaysian Chinese***

The identity of Malaysian Chinese has undergone a long evolution over history, and there are obvious generational differences. Early Chinese immigrants often considered themselves to be "Huaqiao (華僑, Oversea Chinese)", that is, Chinese people temporarily living in a foreign country. They often formed hometown associations, were concerned about China, and had the idea of "returning to one's roots". During World War II, overseas Chinese contributed a lot of property and strength to the war against Japan (Zhang, 2024b). After these overseas Chinese passed away, their hometowns were often written on their tombstones. But with the birth of the second and third generations of Chinese immigrants, the identity of "Huaqiao" gradually changed to "Huayi (華裔, Ethnic Chinese)". They no longer consider themselves to belong to China, but to the country where they were born and live. However, their cultural identity has been preserved with the continuation of Chinese education (Lee, 2009), forming the unique Malaysian Chinese community today.

The increase in social mobility and inter-ethnic exchanges also affect the national identity of Malaysian Chinese. A study of Chinese people in Foochow pointed out that the social circles of the previous generation of Chinese were mostly relatively closed and limited to the Chinese community. However, the new generation of young people have the opportunity to come into contact with people from more ethnic groups and have a more open attitude towards their identity, and their unique identification with "Chinese" has weakened (Ting & Ting, 2020). Ong and Troyer's research (2022) also pointed out that in Chinese families, young people often communicate with their elders in dialects, but mostly use Mandarin with their peers because they have wider interpersonal relationships and more opportunities to come into contact with different communities and different ethnic groups, so they need to use a more common language of communication. Identity maintains a delicate balance and changes between "Chinese" and "Malaysian citizen".

### ***Searching For Roots: New Thinking and Understanding of Cultural Identity***

With the development of the Internet and the increasing mobility of people, people have more and more means to obtain information. For many Malaysian Chinese, this has brought them an opportunity that may be rare for several generations: returning to their ancestral hometowns in China, or finding distant relatives of the same family living in China. As mentioned earlier, the ancestors of the Chinese in Malaysia mostly came from the provinces of Canton and Fukien. These two southern Chinese Reigns have a strong sense of family and hometown and attach particular importance to the connection between family members and the worship of ancestors, as well as the editing and preservation of family trees. Such cultural customs



are also preserved by the Chinese in Malaysia today (Lim, 2007), and this is also one of their motivations for searching for their roots. Through social platforms such as Rednote, many Malaysian Chinese are able to communicate directly with Chinese people living in their ancestral hometowns and obtain accurate information about their ancestral hometowns: whether it is the place names on the tombstones of family ancestors or the brief descriptions of elders, they can all become clues and become a bridge to communicate between the Chinese in the two places. Many people eventually succeeded in finding or visiting their ancestral hometowns, fulfilling the regret of their elders who wanted to go but could not; others met relatives from the same family, with the same surname, who had the same ancestor several generations ago. Their social identity as "Chinese" has become more concrete through such behavior, and their ancestral home has also changed from an empty place name to a scene that can be seen with their own eyes.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay shows that among Malaysian Chinese, Chinese dialects serve as vital cultural anchors. In Malaysian cities like Kuala Lumpur and Penang, people routinely converse in Hokkien, Cantonese or other dialects within their communities, forging bonds based on shared regional heritage. This contrasts sharply with China today, where Mandarin's dominance has rendered such dialect-based groupings obsolete; Speaking any Malaysian Chinese dialect ("Sinophone") is itself a key marker of Chinese identity, meaning language choice reflects and reinforces ethnic solidarity. The essay's second theme contrasts Malaysia's plural nation-state with China's Han-centered model. Under Malaysia's Malay-Muslim majority and nationalist policies, Chinese Malaysians feel compelled to protect their own language and traditions as symbols of heritage. In mainland China, by contrast, the expectation is to assimilate into a single national culture. Anderson's narrative exemplifies this dual reality: he lives as an ordinary Malaysian citizen but also feels "proud" of China's achievements, showing himself as part of the broader Chinese "same nation". Finally, these factors produce a layered identity. Earlier immigrants identified as Huaqiao (Overseas Chinese) with enduring ties to China, whereas later generations increasingly see themselves as Malaysian citizens of Chinese descent. Chinese-language schools and clan associations continue to transmit heritage, so that being both Malaysian and Chinese remains a lived reality.

Reflecting on these findings, our perspective which inspired by Anderson's interview brings the themes into focus. Anderson's own experience highlights the negotiation of identities: in Kuantan, his family speaks Hokkien at home, he learned Cantonese at university, and Mandarin in school. He explicitly points out that Malaysia's Islamic cultural context is a defining difference from China, which helps explain why Malaysian Chinese must consciously preserve their customs. These personal insights validate the essay's claims: language and ancestral rituals become acts of cultural assertion. As mentioned, Malaysian Chinese have even come to view their language and customs as a form of "rebellion" against assimilation. In sum, Anderson's narrative confirms that the symbolic and conflict idea of "homeland and ancestor" profoundly shapes Malaysian Chinese identity in everyday life.

Looking ahead, there are several avenues for future research. The essay itself documents a shift from Huaqiao to Huayi identities over generations, indicating that longitudinal studies of younger Chinese Malaysians could illuminate how heritage and nationalism evolve. The rise of digital diaspora networks is another promising area: Social platforms enable Malaysian Chinese to trace ancestry and reconnect with relatives in China, so studying online community-building could reveal new forms of transnational identity. Comparative research with other overseas Chinese communities (For example, in Indonesia or the West) would also

be fruitful, to see which patterns of language loyalty or homeland sentiment are unique to Malaysia. By following these lines of inquiry, future work can deepen our understanding of how Malaysian Chinese - and overseas Chinese more broadly - reconcile their dual heritage in an increasingly interconnected world.

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