Everyday Identities in Malaysian Chinese's Subjectivities

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ABSTRAK

Dalam kajian identiti orang Cina di Malaysia, kebanyakan kajian adalah berdasarkan analisis pada peringkat makro dan berfokus kepada struktur sosial dan bukan pelaku sosial. Ciri-ciri pelaku sosial sentiasa diandaikan sebagai tetap, pasif dan homogen, sementara keupayaan, kreativiti dan peranan pelaku sosial diabaikan. Sebaliknya, tidak terdapat banyak kajian peringkat mikro dijalankan untuk memahami pembentukan identiti orang Cina di Malaysia. Makalah ini merupakan satu cubaan awal untuk menjawab soalan utama kajian: Apakah pengetahuan orang Cina tentang identiti harian mereka sebagai orang Cina Malaysia dan bagaimana mereka mencipta identiti harian tersebut? Dalam kajian yang telah dilakukan, penulis menggunakan pendekatan abduktif yang merujuk kepada proses yang mengutamakan pemerian pelaku sosial untuk membentuk pengetahuan sosial yang saintifik. Untuk itu, kaedah temubual secara mendalam telah digunakan untuk mengumpul data daripada dua belas orang informan. Tempoh kajian ialah lapan belas bulan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa, sebagai pelaku sosial, orang Cina telah menunjukkan keupayaan, kreativiti dan taakulan dalam proses mereka membentuk identiti. Mereka mempunyai cara kelogikan yang tersendiri untuk mengkonseptualisasikan identiti mereka walaupun kelogikan tersebut adalah tidak begitu tersusun. Identiti harian yang dibentuk bersifat cair, dinamik dan bergantung kepada keadaan. Pembentukan identiti harian pula bergantung pada sumber pengetahuan, konteks dalam mana mereka berada dan interaksi dengan pelaku sosial lain. Tipologi pembentukan identiti harian boleh dibahagi kepada 'rangsangan subjektiviti', 'subjektiviti struktural' dan 'subjektiviti binary oppositional'.

Kata kunci: Orang Cina Malaysia, identiti harian, subjektiviti, pendekatan abduktif

ABSTRACT

In the studies of Malaysian Chinese identity, most writings are based on macro-level analysis, which mainly focus on social structures but not the social actors. The characteristics of the social actors are always assumed as fixed, passive and homogeneous. The abilities, creativity and roles of social actors are often

overlooked. Ironically, there are very few micro-level studies conducted to understand the formation of Chinese identity in Malaysia. This article is a modest attempt by the author to answer these main questions: What is the knowledge of Chinese Malaysians about their everyday identity as Chinese in Malaysia and how do they create their identity in everyday life? In a research conducted by the author the abductive approach was employed, which refers to the process that privileges the social actors' account to generate social scientific knowledge. For that, in-depth interview method was applied to gather data from twelve informants over a period of eighteen months. The result shows that, as social actors, Malaysian Chinese exhibit their abilities, creativity and reasoning in the process of forming their identity. They have their own, though often disorganised, logical ways and methods of conceptualising their identity. The everyday identity formed by the Malaysian Chinese is fluid, dynamic and situational. The formation of the everyday identity is determined by the stock of knowledge, contexts and also their interactions with others. The typology of everyday identity formation can be divided into 'stimulated subjectivity', 'structural subjectivity' and 'binary oppositional subjectivity'.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the studies on identity of any ethnic or racial group are always significant because they are closely associated with the nation building of the country. Generally, nation building refers to a process of constructing national identity that could accommodate ethnic pluralism while at the same time inculcating an overarching sense of nationhood. Ontologically, according to Shamsul (1997), Malaysia is a highly plural society since ancient times, i.e. pre-colonial period, in contrast to most scholars theorizing the phenomenon as a product of colonization. As a plural society, nation building has always been a great challenge for Malaysia.

The ethnic composition of this country comprises two major constitutional categories, namely, Bumiputera (literally means prince of the soil) and non-Bumiputera. Bumiputera comprised 65.1 percent of the total population of Malaysia in Census 2000. The Bumiputera category consists of the Malays and the indigenous peoples of Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak (for instances, Orang Asli, Kadazan, Iban etc). On the other hand, the Chinese (26.0 percent) and Indians (7.7 percent) form the majority of the non-Bumiputera category. The status of the Bumiputera is established in the Malaysian Constitution, Article 153, which has contracted the incontestable special rights of the Bumiputera.

With regard religion and language, as stated in the Malaysian Constitution, all Malays are Muslim and they speak the Malay language. However, not all Muslims are Malays. They also converse in their own local dialects and some still place their faith in animistic practices (Mohd Taib Osman 1989). Similarly, the indigenous peoples in the Malay Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak are not homogeneous in their religions and languages. Likewise, the majority of the Indians in Malaysia comprise Hindus and they speak Tamil, they also embrace different religions (such as Sikhism, Islam and Christianity) and speak different languages (Telegu, Punjabi etc.).

The Chinese on the other hand, have a complex background of language and belief system. The Chinese Malaysians are divided into *fangyanqun*, or in English, the 'dialect groups'. The dialect groups are Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese, Hokchiu, Kwongsi and Henghua (Lee Kam Hing & Tan Chee Beng 2000). Chinese Malaysians do not have a specific name for their 'traditional' religion. Tan Chee Beng (2000) used the term "Chinese religion" to refer to the complex set of beliefs and practices which Chinese Malaysians have inherited from the religious traditions of China as well as their local innovations and the incorporation of some local religious beliefs and practices into their religious system. This term is appropriate since Chinese Malaysians have used *huaren zongjiao* (Chinese religion) as a contrast to other religious traditions. Furthermore, Chinese religion in Malaysia combines Chinese folk religion with elements of Taoist and Buddhist traditions as well as Confucian ethics.

The ethnic distribution has not altered much considering the rapid growth of the Malaysian population. The two main demographic categories of the population, i.e. Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera have been regarded as critical in sustaining ethnic balance in Malaysia. The Sino-Malay relationship plays a pivotal role in the politics of Malaysia's nation building.

Since independence the country leaders have been struggling to create a national identity by managing the above Sino-Malay relationship. The national identity, i.e. the "United Malaysian Nation" or *Bangsa Malaysia* is characterised by national unity and integration among the citizens. However, attempts to construct the identity-of-intent are always filled with obstacles or hindrances. There were numerous events, which happened in the last decade in the context of the Sino-Malay relationship. A few notable events were *Suqiu* in August 1999, the issues of the Chinese primary school in Damansara and unfairness in local university student intakes. There were also questions regarding the standard of the Matriculation qualification compared to the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia or popularly referred to as STPM (A-levels equivalent) because they are the basis for university entrance qualifications. The former is an alternative examination system designed to cater mainly for Bumiputera and this is a source of discontent and suspicion for the Chinese. The above issues contributed to the already insecure feeling of the Chinese community in relation to their status and position in this country.

The uniqueness of the background of this country and the complex Sino-Malay relations mentioned above has triggered numerous research and discussion on Chinese identity in Malaysia. In the studies of Malaysian Chinese identity, most writings are based on macro-level analysis, which mainly focus on social structures but not on the social actors (Lee Yok Fee 2003).

In the previous macro-level studies, most scholars focus on certain structures or context to investigate how Chinese identity is developed. For instance, Tan Chee Beng (1983, 2000) has conducted numerous studies on the identity of Chinese Baba and Nyonya in Malacca. In his studies, Tan concluded that the Chinese Baba and Nyonya's identity is situational and as a product of culture change, i.e. through the process of assimilation. This cultural identity is manifested through many cultural elements such as costume, hairstyle, food and cooking, belief system, customs and the most significant is their language. Hou (2002) on the other hand, discussed the Malaysian Chinese identity in the context of culture. Hou discussed the changes of Chinese identity in two main periods, i.e. pre- and post-independence of Malaysia. By analysing Malaysian Chinese literatures, Hou concluded that Chinese identity and Chinese culture are products of the changes in ethnic politics in Malaysia.

In the context of education, Ku (2003) discussed the construction of Chinese identity by examining the development of Chinese secondary school in Malaysia. In his point of view, Chinese education plays important roles in transmitting Chinese traditional values to new generation and simultaneously instills the spirit of nationalism and political awareness to them. Nagata (1995) has done a thorough study on the Chinese identity in relations to religion. By focusing on the Chinese Christian community in Penang, Nagata examined how Christian customs and culture affect Chinese religious identity. She concluded that participation or involvement in Christianity, which is universal and non-traditional has not caused Chinese Christians to deny their Chinese culture and identity.

There are scholars who studied Chinese identity in the context of politic. For example, Loh (1988, 2000) discussed the Chinese political identity based on his fieldwork in Kinta, Perak from 1977-1978. In this study, Loh related the political awareness among the Chinese villagers to their local socioeconomic need and the shift of their support from a legitimate political party leader to another leader. Another scholar, Hara (2003) has examined the transformation of Chinese identity consciousness during 1945-1957 that is from one that is China-oriented to Malaya-oriented. His writing has described clearly how the Chinese had changed their identity and at the same time maintained certain elements of their identity when they migrated from the Chinese World to the Malay World. Hara has focused on few important political elements to observe the Chinese identity. For instance, he examined how Kuomingtang (KMT) and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) had divided the Chinese community in Malaya yet enhanced their relationship to China as their motherland at that time. Hara also used the public gatherings, especially the "Double Tenth" celebration, and the involvement of the Chinese

association and political parties, as the gauge of the level of change of the Malayan-Chinese identity consciousness.

Similarly, to Hara, Chui (1990) also discussed the changes of Chinese national identity in Malaya in the 15 years after World War II, i.e. from 1945 to 1959. In Chui's writing, he concluded that the alteration of Chinese identity is a product of reaction to political institutions. Based on secondary materials such as the newspapers, associations' anniversary magazines, government reports and theses, Chui analysed how Chinese political institutions, such as KMT, China Democratic Alliance, Straits Chinese Community, MCP, Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Chinese Chambers of Commerce (CCC) reacted to the drastic political change of that time and how they manifested the Chinese national identity.

In the macro-level studies discussed above, the abilities, creativity and roles of social actors are not emphasized. The characteristics of the social actor are always assumed as fixed, passive and homogeneous. Ironically, there are very few micro-level studies conducted to understand the formation of Chinese identity in Malaysia. Therefore, in the research that was conducted, the author wanted to answer these main questions: What is the knowledge of Chinese Malaysians about their everyday identity as and how do they create their identity in everyday life?

The article is divided into three main sections: the first gives a brief explanation of the concepts of identity and subjectivity; the second introduces the issue of everyday identity by using abductive approach; the third discusses the types of everyday identity in Malaysian Chinese's knowledge and the formation of the identity in everyday life.

IDENTITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

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

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

In brief, the psychodynamic tradition started with Sigmund Freud's theory of identification (1910). This theory suggests that individual identity is formed

through the process of how an individual assimilates and combines objects and people during his childhood. This theory emphasizes the inner force of the psychic structure or mental abilities as possessing a continuous identity, which is similar to the view of Lichtenstein (1977). This is the ability to sustain similarity in a context of continuous alteration.

Nevertheless, Erikson (1968) was the one who expanded the concept of identity in the psychodynamic theoretical framework. He deemed identity as a process that is located in an individual and cultural communal force. Following this, during the World War II Erikson developed the concept 'identity crisis' when he was studying patients who had lost their sense of personal sameness and historical continuity. Eventually, Erikson generalised identity crisis in the context of the human lifespan, in that personal crisis and historical moments are interrelated. Subsequently, the concept of identity crisis is used as a common term and has triggered other concepts such as 'mid-life crisis' (Plummer 2003).

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

Compared to the concept of 'self', 'self-concept' refers to a 'product' in reflexive activities. It is a concept possessed by an individual as a human being in addition to physical, social and spiritual or moral aspects. Rosenberg (1979) defines 'self-concept' as "…the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object…" If the meaning of identity is defined in this context, identity focuses on the meanings that obtain 'self' as object that provide structure and content to the self-concept, meanwhile sustaining 'self' in a social system.

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

With regard the processual interactionism, Blumer (1969), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Becker (1963) and Stone (1962), emphasize the construction and maintenance of identity through the process of negotiation in the context of social situations. The negotiation of identity is the main aspect of an individual's effort in defining situations and constructing reality. This meaning is deemed as a product in a flexible and reciprocal interaction process. Concurrently, action

and interaction are considered as uncertain. All these have caused the nature of 'I' to become unpredictable. The construction of identity for "self" and others in a particular situation has become problematic because of the weak consensus among the actors. Thus, the cognitive activity, role-taking is important in such a dialectical process. This also means that identity in this perspective is situational, emergent, reciprocal and negotiated. In addition, scholars in processual interactionism see the self-concept as an inseparable cause and effect in social interaction (Gecas 1982:10-11).

In this tradition, observation is the most useful and widely adopted method to examine social interaction in a natural social environment. This method enables researchers to understand the identity construction process, by entering the universe of discourse in the social world as a role-taking participant. Other methods such as life history and historical analysis are employed to scrutinise the world of interactants, that is situational, processual and meaningful.

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

In addition, Gordon (1976) advocates how role relates individual with social structure:

… the value aspects of roles connect persons to culture; the normative aspects of roles provide motivations to conduct and structure to social action; and 'sense-making' or interpretive aspects of roles determine much of personal cognition, attitudinal predispositions, memories, and plans...

The concept of role is typically viewed as a prediction of an individual reaction according to his formal and informal status in a social system. However, "role" and "status" are used interchangeably, especially in the context of identity.

The structure of self-concept is perceived as an organization of hierarchical 'role-identity' of an individual. The characteristic of self-concept can be understood through the concept of commitment. In this "self-structure" understanding, the degree of commitment to an identity influences the significance of an identity in guiding an individual's behaviour. The degree of commitment is determined by the nature and locus of the 'role-set' and 'identity-set', i.e. the identity network and relations within the roles of an identity.

According to Gecas (1982: 15), the instrument, Twenty Statements Test (TST) was employed by the structural interactionists to investigate identity. TST

is an open instrument to question subjects regarding the issue of "who am I?" Using coding techniques the collected abstract data are then concretised. Hitherto, multiple identity coding schemes have been developed to categorise identity, to scrutinise the relations between self-concept and social structure, and to discover the trends in identity which contain self-conceptions.

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

The above discussion indicates that the identity discourse is inevitable but relates to subjectivity. According to Weedon (2004:19), identity is better understood as fixed and constant when an individual is in a common mode of subjectivity. Ideologically, identity functions to limit the plurality of subjectivity in a discursive situation, it provides individuals with a parameter to see who they are and what their positions are. This process involves recruiting subjects into a specific meaning and value that is formed in a particular discourse that encourages identification. Weedon (2004:19) also suggests, "…identity is perhaps best understood as a limited and temporary fixing for the individual of a particular mode of subjectivity as apparently what one is..." In short, at the beginning of the research, the author did not determine the specific aspects of identity such as social, cultural or ethnic identity. The nature or kind of identity in the research is heavily contingent upon the subjectivity of the respondents.

ABDUCTIVE APPROACH

In previous studies of Chinese identity in Malaysia, majority researchers have employed macro perspectives to examine the alteration and sustaining of Chinese identity. Nevertheless, in terms of methodology, both macro- and micro-levels respectively differ in orientation and technique.

From the macro-perspective, ontologically, researchers assume society as a complex of interrelated social structures or institutions. Thus, the formation of social reality such as identity is regarded as a product of the correlation of social institutions or structures in the society. The researchers who employ macro-level analysis emphasise the roles and functions of structures in determining individual identity. They assume that identity is influenced by the alteration of

social structure. The orientation of the macro-research is to hypothesise the correlation between social identity and social structure or institutions like politics, the economy, education, culture and religion, in society. In this theoretical framework, epistemologically, the construction of the knowledge of identity is derived from the proven hypotheses.

To verify the research hypotheses, conventionally macro-researchers employ the deductive approach. In this approach, the main aim is to test the assumptions or hypotheses. In this process, the abstract variables are concretised to computable numerical values. Traditionally, data are collected by using methods such as surveys. In addition, the questionnaire used in the survey is created according to the research hypotheses. Obviously, this kind of research methodology is very much "author-oriented", which means the researcher determines which facets of identity are to be scrutinised. Thus, it is not suitable to employ such methodology to understand how Chinese conceptualise everyday identity in their subjectivity.

There are few researchers who have used micro-perspectives to study Chinese identity in Malaysia (Nonini 1997; Carstens 1983; 2005). In this micro-perspective, researchers use the inductive approach to examine Chinese identity. The orientation of this approach is to form a generalisation that can explain identity in the social world. Ontologically, researchers assume that society is formed by social phenomena. They also assume that individuals in the society are active, creative and capable subjects. To understand social phenomena like identity, the researchers collect data by employing observation, participant observation and interview methods to record events that happen in the social world. As a result, the researchers tend to formulate a theoretical framework to capture the trends and patterns of a social phenomenon.

Back to the question of this research, the primary purpose is to understand the interpretation of social actors of their identity as a social reality. Although the perspective of this study is also at the micro-level that emphasises social actors and assumes they have the capability and creativity to conceptualise about themselves, the inductive approach is not suitable. This is because the inductive approach focuses on social events and examines the causal relations between them. The interest of this study is to focus on the knowledge and definition of social actors on their identity.

In the author's opinion, the abductive approach suggested by Blaikie (2000) is more suitable for the purpose of this research. In short, this approach combines theoretical thinking in hermeneutics, phenomenology and interpretivism especially in the works of Schutz (1967) and Giddens (1984). The primary focus of this approach is to examine social life by understanding the motives and accounts of social actors. Therefore, the abductive approach is appropriate to be employed to determine the everyday concepts, meanings and motives of the social actors in order to construct the technical accounts from the everyday lay accounts.

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

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

From the epistemological aspect, what is social reality is based on the social actors' beliefs and interpretations. Scientific social knowledge is derived from everyday meanings and concepts, and shared social construction of knowledge. In other words, this micro-level discussion of identity should focus on how the everyday interpreted meaning is transferred into forms of academic knowledge (Blaikie 2000:116).

The primary aim of the research conducted is to generate an analytical generalisation rather than a statistical generalisation of Chinese identity in Malaysia (Yin 1989, 1993). To understand the formation of Chinese Malaysians' everyday identity, the author focuses on 'lay-Chinese' rather than the 'elite Chinese'. The 'lay-Chinese' in this study refers to the common citizen or subaltern who do not occupy important posts or authority in politic and academic. A case study was conducted on a key informant, a housewife, WSM's societal network for 18 months. The remaining eleven informants in WSM's societal network were engaged through snow-balling method. The number of informants stopped at twelve when the data or information regarding the formation of identity has become saturated. All twelve informants requested to remain anonymous because they consider the study of Chinese identity to be sensitive in Malaysia.

The selected twelve Chinese are from different background such as in terms of gender, age (ranging from twenty-two to seventy-nine years old when the interview was conducted), educational level (ranging from uneducated to holding a masters degree), occupation (student, housewife, white and blue collars) and language (English and non-English) were interviewed. Generally they were questioned about their background and how they see themselves as 'Chinese'. The recorded narratives were then validated by revisiting and asking the subjects to clarify the narratives. The narratives were then analysed and the commonalities in the emergent themes were identified which are eventually used to form a typology of everyday Chinese identity. Analysed data are also used to develop

a theoretical framework to understand the formation of Chinese Malaysians' everyday identity.

EVERYDAY CHINESE IDENTITIES

As argued by anti-essentialists, identities are not things which exist; they have no essential or universal qualities. They are instead discursive constructions, the product of discourses or regulated ways of speaking about the world. In other words, identities are constituted and made by representations, notably language (Barker 2000). Therefore, as have been discussed, the concept of identity and subjectivity are closely related and inseparable.

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

CHINESE AS HARDWORKING, FLEXIBLE AND PASSIVE 'SURVIVALISTS'

In the 19th century, the Chinese migrated to Malaya as sojourners mainly to make their fortunes. The Chinese today have settled and become citizens of Malaysia. However, the cultural traits of the early immigrant can still be traced, especially in relation to their "hardworking" and "seek food" attitudes (找吃 or *cari makan* in Mandarin and Malay languages, meaning to survive). While maintaining these characteristics, the Chinese have also developed other traits like passivity, quietness and flexibility due to the economic and political conditions of this country. One of the informants, WSM said, … A Chinese in Malaysia is *ming zhe bao shen* (明哲保身)… (A Chinese in Malaysia is passive and does not interfere into other's affairs.) The Chinese are self-centered and only focus on taking good care of their domestic affairs so that they can live a comfortable life. In other words, the Chinese refrain from openly revealing their opinion, especially on their political status or rights.

As a senior citizen of this country, LQM who has lived in the country for more than 70 years expresses a similar view as WSM. LQM emphasized:

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

LQM also said:

What I see is that Chinese in Malaysia just want to survive (找吃 or cari makan). If there is no racial problem, Malaysia is a relatively good place to live. Compared to the Chinese in Indonesia and the Philippines, their life is always being threatened. I think our government (refers to the Malays) is better. The most important thing is peace and safety, to continue to survive (找吃 or cari makan) and finish my life here.

What we can conclude from LQM's narrative is that Chinese are 'survivalists' or 'survivors' and to continue surviving, they have to be passive in fighting for equal rights and status, and to avoid unnecessary problems. The Chinese therefore maintain that they should remain silent and avoid confronting other races even though they perceive that they are not treated fairly.

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

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

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

Informants in this study emphasises a few characteristics in describing themselves as Chinese in Malaysia. The subjects do not see themselves as

much different from their forefather who came here to make a living centuries ago. They still identify themselves as 'survivalists' or 'survivors' although nowadays they are living in a much comfortable condition compared to their ancestors. Not only that, in order to continue to 'survive' in this country, characteristics such as hardworking, flexible, quiet and passive are deemed as crucial for the Chinese to maintain their chances in "seeking food" in Malaysia.

CHINESE AS SENSITIVE "SECOND CLASS" CITIZEN

Other than defining Chinese identity as characterised by hard work, flexibility and passivity, the respondents see their identity in the context of status. For instance, SL said:

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

Although SL considers herself as a second-class citizen and not receiving equal treatment, she insists that she still identifies herself with this country. However, she also admits that the identification does not involve a feeling of love for this country and is subjected to change in the future. She added:

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

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

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

Another respondent, LKC, also saw the unequal treatment of the Chinese but viewed it in a positive way. He considers the status and treatment received by the Chinese to be better than the Indians in Malaysia. From his point of view, the majority of the Indians are living in poverty. Therefore, the Chinese in Malaysia

can be categorised between 'first-class' and 'second-class'. Although the Chinese are not treated well, they are able to survive (找吃 or cari makan). TAL also shared the same opinion. She emphasised that it is proper for the Malays to receive help from the government because they are *Bumiputera* in this country. The Malays should be granted financial help because they are in need. She said:

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

TAL's positive attitude towards the government's unequal treatment of the Chinese is also the result of her confidence in Chinese abilities and reputation. She said:

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

According to author's observation, most of the informants expressed their anxiety and saw the discussion of Chinese identity as 'second-class' citizens as a sensitive issue. "… Is this too sensitive to discuss? … Will this bring problems to me? Because you are recording it…, … Please off the record of what I said just now! It is too sensitive!.. and …Will I be 'ISA'ed because I talk about this sensitive issue?.." These were the responses indicated in the interviews although they spoke in a flippant attitude. However, all informants in this study refused to reveal their real name in the research.

The attitude on 'sensitive issues' in everyday conversation and interaction is common in the Chinese community. This attitude serves as a control mechanism in the social actors' sub-consciousness. This sensitivity guides the social actors' behavior and thus forms a harmonic relation among the social actors, although at a superficial level. In other words, the interpretation of social actors maintains the social order in society.

In a nutshell, this notion of Chinese Malaysians' everyday identity highlights the aspect of 'others' in self-identification of an individual. Chinese Malaysians always compare their sosial status with other races, especially the Malay in the country. However, different individuals may have different descriptions or ideas regarding Chinese Malaysians' identity although the matter is in the same context, i.e. the second class citizen.

THE FORMATION OF CHINESE IDENTITY IN SUBJECTIVITIES

In the micro-perspective, individuals in society are assumed as subjects who have the ability to think, feel, act and interact freely. Simultaneously, they learn, assign and reassign meanings to their actions and others' actions. Thus, social reality is constructed by the individuals' interactions and their intersubjectivity. In the context of identity formation, Chinese subjectivity (i.e. how they see themselves as subjects in the society) can be divided into three major forms, namely stimulated subjectivity, binary oppositional subjectivity and structural subjectivity.

STIMULATED SUBJECTIVITY

As a subject in the society, the Chinese actively interact and are always stimulated by the symbols in the social world. The presence of the stimulants cause the social actors to think and evaluate who they are. Thus, this kind of subjectivity is labeled as stimulated subjectivity. The stimulant is conveyed primarily through the popular media like newspapers and television. Advertisements, news and comments in newspapers function as a medium to stimulate individuals to evaluate themselves. However, the nature of the interaction process between individual and stimulant is subjective. Symbols displayed in the media and other symbols like other's behaviour, can be interpreted differently by an individual. Nevertheless, it can be also be interpreted as shared meaning or intersubjectivity.

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

Besides advertisements, WSM also highlighted politicians' speeches, especially ministers and high-ranking government officials, always reminding her of her Chinese identity. For instance, WSM quoted the news report on the then Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Dr. Shafie Mohamed Salleh's speech in UMNO 2004 Annual Assembly. In the speech, Dr. Shafie assured the Malays that the percentage of Malay students was guaranteed to be increased if Malays continued to support him. According to WSM, this kind of speech or political manifesto, whether in newspapers or on television screens, have caused her to feel insecure about her children's future. As a Chinese in Malaysia, she feels helpless and anxious for her children to enter local public higher education institutions in the future. This stimulant has caused WSM to say, "…Chinese in Malaysia have developed an ignorant attitude. They only want to take care of themselves and dare not speak up…" She used a Chinese proverb, *ming zhe bao shen* (明哲保身), to illustrate Chinese attitudes and this attitude allows the Malay politicians to give the "sensitive" speech without considering the feelings of the non-Malays.

From example, individual subjectivity in the society is the result of their negotiation with what happened at the macro-level. Social order, either in the form of harmony or conflict, is dynamic and unfixed. It can be influenced when individual's subjectivity is reconstructed due to the external stimulants.

<div align="center">BINARY OPPOSITIONAL SUBJECTIVITY</div>

In the social world, individuals also interact with other subjects who are defined as opponents. In the context of identity, an individual tends to differentiate his identity by comparing himself with the oppositional ethnic group. The ethnocentric attitude and the stereotyping of other ethnic groups, inevitably, influence this form of subjectivity. Furthermore, with the limited experiences in their inter-ethnic interactions, the individuals tend to believe that the untrue generalisation is real.

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

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

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

Although LTL's points of view are largely derived from his selective experience and prejudicial attitude, his attitudes and actions are based on these interpretations and have constructed these realities in the social world. With this ethnocentric interpretation, LTL distances himself from the Malays and distrusts those Malays around him. He indicated that he would not leave the

factory if there were no Chinese there and he would not leave any important documents, door keys or important tasks to the non-Chinese in the factory.

<div align="center">STUCTURAL SUBJECTIVITY</div>

In social studies, the structural tradition analyses society by dividing it into parts, and examining the interrelations between them. However, this ability is not only possessed by the social scientists. The research shows, individuals in the society also have such abilities when they discuss their identity and subjectivity. Generally, a few major facets are constructed in discourse, in biological, background, political, educational, language, and cultural terms.

As an example, when the respondent, WHS narrated his understanding of Chinese identity, he discussed it in terms of background and origins, language, customs, philosophy, political right and socialisation. Besides WHS, six other informants also employed the structural analysis to define what Chinese identity is, although they focused on different facets of the identity.

The remarkable observation in this study shows that formal socialisation plays an important role in determining social actors' abilities in analysing social facts and rationalising their points of view. It is noticeable that the informants who employed the structural analysis received higher formal education. The informants who did not receive any formal education were not able to analyse and narrate their discourse systematically. They depended heavily on their life experience to define their identities.

<div align="center">DEFINING CHINESE IDENTITY</div>

How do Chinese define their identity? Based on the stock of knowledge, the social actors define their identity. Undeniably, almost all informants in the research conducted acknowledged that they had never thought about the issue of identity and being Chinese. This form of knowledge is regarded as 'taken-for-granted' knowledge, i.e. informants had not really thought through the issue in detail but they assumed that they knew the issue (Garfinkel 1967). Figure 1 illustrates how Chinese act as social actors in forming their everyday identity in subjectivity. Generally, it can be divided into three major parts, i.e. source of knowledge, context and interaction process.

The research shows that the source of knowledge of the Chinese about their identity includes experience, reading and socialisation. As a knowledgeable social actor, informants have the ability to categorize their experiences and to use them when needed (Schutz 1967; Water 1994). The majority of informants indicated that the major source of their knowledge is from newspaper reading. They also claimed that their ability to analyse social facts, reality or symbol in the social works is learned from the process of socialisation, which can be divided into formal and informal socialisation.

How informants defined their Chinese identity was also influenced by their context. Context can be general or specific. A general context refers to shared social norms among the informants. For instance, most of the informants deem the discussion of Chinese status, in comparison with the Malays as sensitive and which may bring harm to them. Simultaneously, the informants may differ in their views because of differences in values based on different institutions and they have different cultural backgrounds, such as education, religion, family, stages of life and linguistic ability.
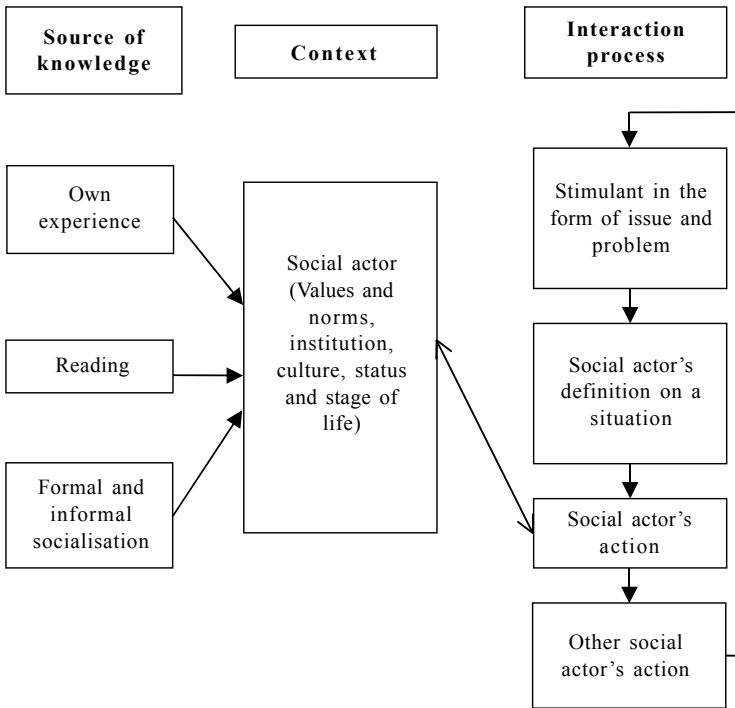
FIGURE 1. The formation of social actor's everyday identity in subjectivity

CONCLUSION

In the process of interaction, informants as social actors are active and alert to interpret social facts and symbols in their social world. However, the significance of the symbols or social facts is contingent upon which context an informant is in. In other words, only relevant symbols or social facts will be focused and employed by the particular informant in a particular context. Thus, as found in this study, only related issues and problems selected by informants function

as stimulants to them when discussing identity. The stimulants function through media or social interaction in the informant's everyday life. Eventually, the issue or problem is interpreted and the informant acts accordingly. The interpretation could be sustained or even strengthened when there is an inter-subjectivity, or it could be reconstructed when the interpretation is different. All these depend on the interaction of an informant with other social actors.

Using a macro-perspective alone to examine Chinese identity is not sufficient. To complement the understanding of Chinese identity formation, besides the macro-level reality, the micro-level reality is also important. As social actors, Malaysian Chinese exhibit their abilities, creativity and reasoning in the process of forming their identity. They have their own logical ways and methods in conceptualising their identity. Moreover, the everyday identity formed by the Malaysian Chinese is fluid, dynamic and situational.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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