Lanterns, Name Planks, Ancestral Portraits: Maintaining Chinese-Ness in the Identity Development of Chinese Malaysians

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Abstract

Past historical events, government policies, and various levels of acculturation have given rise to new and distinct identities for the contemporary Chinese Malaysian community. Expressly, while the Chinese represent a distinct ethnolinguistic group, centuries of acculturation have made them part of the fabric of Malaysian society. This qualitative study explores how they continue to define and represent their identity in the contemporary landscape of Malaysia. Data consist of (1) photos of artefacts collected from the home domain of five Chinese participants from Penang, a city culturally and linguistically influenced by a long history of Chinese settlement, and (2) semi-structured interviews with five participants. The findings show that the participants used three types of artefacts, namely cultural (lanterns), historical (name planks and ancestral portraits), and festive (*ang pows,* fireworks, decorations, and traditional dishes), to mark their identity in Penang. This study contributes to further understanding the role of artefacts in unveiling how they are integral to the complex interplay of identity, culture, and belonging of the Chinese community in Malaysia.

Keywords: identity, Chinese Malaysians, artefacts, Malaysia, Penang

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1. Introduction

Identity is characterised as dynamic and developing over time (Hall, 1990, 1992, 1993). Several variables, such as ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, educational background, and social status, influence the complexity of identity development (Holmes, 2015), resulting in fluidity and ambiguity (Dervin, 2012). Due to forces of history, cultures, and social contexts, identity positions can be contradictory and problematic, and thus, "they need to be considered as emergent rather than fixed" (Hall, 1990, p. 226). As Hall (2006, p. 251) asserts, "Within us, we have contradictory identities pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about."

There are two pertinent theories to conceptualise how identity is constructed and developed: social identity and cultural identity. According to Tajfel (1981, p. 255), social identity is "part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to the group membership." That is, an individual's social identity is derived from perceived membership in a specific group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), generated through an ongoing categorisation of self and others to establish differentiation (Oakes et al., 1994). While social identity theory focuses on group membership as a source for claiming identity, cultural identity theory emphasises how identity negotiation is based on shared history, cultures, and social contexts (Hall, 1990). On the other hand, *cultural identity* is defined as 'one true self' hiding within a group of people with a shared history and ancestors. This definition considers identity as stable and unchanging. In another sense, cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Here, cultural identity is regarded as fluid

because it is imbricated in history and transmitted through generations from older group members to younger generations. Both theories explain that identity is economically, politically, and culturally interdependent; each aspect is mutable over time and, thus, negotiated differently. The boundaries between social groups are complicated to define, each having its attributes, roles, and norms within the social contexts. Chen and Collier (2012) therefore, sum up identity as fluid, relational, multiple, and multifaceted.

In Malaysia, the Chinese community recognises Malaysia as their home country after several generations have settled. However, simultaneously they maintain a strong emphasis on their ethnic identity as a backlash against racial politics and unequal treatment, especially in the educational and economic fields. Suryadinata (2006, p. 97) states that the Chinese have adopted an accommodated idea in which "the group develop[s] working arrangement while maintaining their distinct identities." The identity developed is complex due to multi-layered struggles in Malaysian society. The community's struggles include growing up experiences as Chinese in Malaysia; resilience in maintaining Chinese culture, tradition, and dialects; engagement in Malaysia's racial politics; and new societal and economic changes. In the more pronounced multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual society that Malaysia has created in the 21st century, the Chinese community's identity deserves more in-depth exploration, for it is bound to impact generations to come not only concerning a community's ethnolinguistic vitality (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) but also in relation to identity development. Looming sociolinguistic questions of this nature represent research gaps worth examining. In fact, to date, there are limited studies (e.g., Ling, 2008; Matondang, 2016) that attempt to explore and address these issues. This study aims to explore aspects of the culturally-vibrant Chinese community of Penang, a city in Malaysia with a long history of

Chinese settlements that were heavily influenced by local linguistic practices, by addressing the following research question:

- How does the Chinese community continue to define and represent their identity in today's contemporary landscape of Malaysia?

A Brief History of The Chinese Community in Malaysia

According to Reid (1996), records show Chinese movement and relations in Southeast Asia as early as the 13th century. However, the first Chinese migrants in Malaya (the previous name for Malaysia before independence) were confirmed in the 1400s when the Hokkien traders from Zhang Zhou, China, engaged in lucrative maritime activities with the Malacca sultanate (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). During that time, Malacca established a trading port to attract merchants from neighbouring countries. The Hokkien traders played an essential role in trading activities, as their leaders were given administrative duties as port officials. Consequently, they settled in the new homeland to continue their businesses (Yen, 1993). Some brought wives from China, while others married local Malay women. The interethnic marriages formed the 'hybrid' (Rubdy & Alsagoff, 2014) Peranakan culture, which adopted some Malay sociocultural traditions. For instance, the variety of Hokkien spoken was heavily influenced by Malay (L. E. Tan, 2000); the Babas (reference for men) wore Chinese garments or Western suits, while the Nyonyas (reference for women) wore *sarung* (a large tube of fabric wrapped around the waist); and they preferred spicy food like *achar* (pickled vegetables) and *assam laksa* (rice noodles with vegetables served in spicy fish broth).

When Sir Francis Light declared Penang a free-trading port in 1786, opportunities to interact with European elites and the local population attracted more traders from China, India, and Southeast Asia (Yen, 2000).

Developing the gold-mining industry in Sarawak, tin-mining in Negeri Sembilan, Perak, and Selangor, and pepper and gambier plantations in Johor brought in more Chinese labourers. In addition to these pull factors, substantial Chinese migration took place to escape famine and poverty in China (Yen, 2000). However, these working locations were remote and thus isolated the migrants, which resulted in them strengthening bonds among themselves and forming clan associations to assist with various daily activities.

The Chinese excelled in their respective work roles due to their linguistic ability and exposure to the Western culture, which saw the community rise as an economic powerhouse in Malaya. This ascension caused dissatisfaction among local Malays and led to the formation of the New Economic Plan (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). Nevertheless, with an unlimited supply of Chinese labourers and solid entrepreneurial skills (Andaya & Andaya, 2017), the Chinese played a crucial role in the rapid economic development of British Malaya and modern Malaysia. Because many migrants relied on their relatives and clan associations for assistance to gain employment, strong kinship ties were maintained with family members in China (Cheong et al., 2013). The community was all but homogenous, with lineage and dialect groups running the gamut from Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainan, Taishan, and Foochow. Little interest was manifested in local politics, with more concern in preserving culture and identity. Hence, they showed little resistance when offered citizenship as a compensatory "bargaining tool" (Gill, 2005, p. 246).

The Chinese community established *sishu*, a small school to teach traditional subjects using dialects as the medium of instruction (Tan & Santhiram, 2010). These schools provided education to the community's children because the British administration did not take responsibility for educating the migrants. Gradually, they turned into modern schools,

employed Mandarin as a medium of instruction, and adopted the curriculum from China (Ong & Troyer, 2022). This expansion was halted during World War II. After the war, the Chinese did not return to China but continued to live in Malaya because they had better lives and stable jobs. At this point, a social movement to save Mandarin-medium education began. Mandarin-medium primary schools were accepted into the national education system with partial government funding, and a local curriculum was implemented. However, Mandarin-medium secondary schools lost the battle and had to switch their medium of instruction to English, and later Malay, while retaining Mandarin as a subject. Those that did not comply with the policy became private/independent schools, which were not considered part of the national education system because they adopted curricula from China or Taiwan.

Today, Mandarin-medium education in Malaysia comprises more than 1280 primary schools, 60 independent secondary schools, and three tertiary-level colleges (Gill, 2014). This remarkable achievement was acknowledged in the "Minority Rights Group International report: The Chinese of Southeast Asia," which praised the community's determination and resilience in establishing "Southeast Asia's most comprehensive Chinese-language system of education" (Heidhues, 1992, p. 13). Mandarin-medium education gained acceptance in the community because parents treated it as a path for transmitting Chinese culture, traditional values, and nationalism (Ku, 2003). Making provisions for Mandarin-medium education is perceived as a means for developing a stronger Chinese identity (Lee & Ting, 2016). Moreover, many regard Mandarin as their mother tongue because it is viewed as a language that holds values of solidarity (Ting & Puah, 2017) and unites family members (Ong & Ben-Said, 2022).

This situation saw the birth of a new generation of local-born Chinese who could "assimilate, integrate, and acculturate" into the local community (Wang, 1993, p. 83). Some Chinese became leaders who cooperated with the Malay administrators to gain political and social acceptance. During this period, the Chinese forged a new Chinese Malaysian identity, known as modern Chinese, referencing a localised national identity that does not override the Chinese identity (Hirschman, 1988). Nevertheless, the Chinese were still wary of *Bumiputra* because of its crucial role in Malaysian racial politics emphasising special rights for the Malays. The tension continues until today, but it peaked in the 1969 racial riots, which caused many casualties in both communities. Subsequently, the New Economic Plan was formed in 1971, recognizing Malays as indigenous to the land and affording them special rights and privileges. With this policy, the government hoped to balance the economic share between all ethnic communities, but in reality, it only benefited upper-class Malays and created uncertainty for other communities. In the longer term, the Chinese community felt unequal because they were faced with obstacles, particularly in the fields of education and business. This situation has led them to seek fairer opportunities elsewhere, especially in the last 30 years (Ling, 2008). Many young Chinese have pursued tertiary education abroad because of the limited quota in local universities, and after graduation, they remain abroad instead of returning home to seek professional opportunities.

Summing up, today's Chinese Malaysian community has forged an identity that is the product of racial politics intertwined with ethnicity and nationality (C. B. Tan, 2000). This has resulted in a shift in social orientation from a former geographical/ideological space associated with China to acculturation into Malaysian society after settling in the new homeland. As a result, a space of self-definition and a new identity has been carved out

in relation to other ethnic communities. This identity has been described by Carstens (cited in Chan 2018, p. 161) as "multiple, diverse, and constantly shifting." Despite being able to speak the country's national and official language, the Chinese community maintains their dialects, lifestyles, cultures, and complex heritage (Lam & Yeoh, 2004), which is distinctive from other diasporic Chinese communities in countries such as Thailand and Indonesia. To illustrate, the Chinese community in Thailand has primarily assimilated into the local community, while those in Indonesia are still undergoing acculturation.

2. Methodology

Data collection occurred in July 2016 in Penang as part of a more extensive study. Penang was chosen as a research site due to its long-established history of Chinese settlement that allowed for exploring the identity development of the Chinese community there. With a population of 1.77 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020), Penang is located in the north of Peninsular Malaysia. The modern history of Penang started in the late 18th century when the Sultan of Kedah offered to lease the island to the British East India Company after experiencing several attacks from Thailand and Burma (Macalister & Ong, 2020). In 1786, Sir Francis Light, under the British East India Company, took possession of the island and renamed it the Prince of Wales Island (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). However, due to different expectations, the Sultan of Kedah launched several attacks in 1790 to recapture the island. Nevertheless, the British successfully fought and claimed the island by signing a treaty. The island was renamed Penang in 1838.

Soon after, Sir Francis Light established George Town as a free trading port in Penang, which attracted many traders. The first group of Chinese traders to arrive and settle in Penang was the Peranakan Chinese, also known as "the descendants of 15th century Hokkien traders" (Keong, 2006, p. 59), whom Light saw as the "key to the success of his project—[that was] to make Penang the chief port for trade between India and China" (p. 60). Later, new migrants—the Hokkiens and Cantonese—arrived, followed by the fourth group, the Hakkas (Keong, 2006). As migrants, they established their dialect groups according to their occupations (Andaya & Andaya, 2017) to assist their community members and form bonds. The Hokkien speakers joined with the Peranakan Chinese as they shared similar ancestry, the Cantonese remained distinct, and the Hakkas set up their community. By the 1870s, the joining of the Peranakan Chinese and the Hokkiens became the most influential community language group in Penang (Keong, 2006). As for the Indian traders, they began to arrive in Penang "as early as 1770" (Mujani, 2012, p. 1350). After Penang was established, the Jawi Peranakan and Tamil Muslim traders flocked in. By the 19th and 20th centuries, the Indian population increased due to labour migration for work at rubber and tea plantations (Mukhopadhyay, 2010). Thus, these Chinese and Indian migrations contributed to the foundations that built today's multilingual and multiethnic Penang.

The first part of data collection involved taking photos of artefacts within the homes of five Chinese participants, who were friends and family members of the first author. Before embarking on the task, five participants were recruited through a network sampling strategy, and permission was sought. Thirty-five photos of artefacts related to Chinese tradition and culture were taken–the second part involved interviewing the recruited participants. Semi-structured interviews with the five participants were conducted

to understand the notion of Chinese identity. Some additional prompts were used during the interview to cater to participants' responses. Each interview lasted for forty minutes. Pseudonyms were used to secure anonymity, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' profile

Name	Gender	Age group	Occupation
Richard	M	30-49	Policymaker
Mike	M	50-69	Lantern maker
Anna	F	30-49	Accountant
Mei	F	50-69	Retiree
Hao	M	70 and above	Shop owner

After completion, the recordings were transcribed with minor corrections to the morphosyntax for intelligibility. Subsequently, the transcripts were analysed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The process began with the first researcher going through all transcripts to acquire a general view while constantly reminding herself of the importance of avoiding *a priori* assumptions and beliefs to circumvent bias within the findings (Ong, 2022). Key phrases were highlighted and compared to derive analytical codes. All codes were subsequently evaluated, with common ones grouped as categories, while those that did not fit were re-evaluated. Finally, both researchers reviewed all categories to look for thematic connections.

3. Findings

3.1 Cultural Artefacts

As mentioned earlier, although the Chinese community regarded Malaysia as their new home, they maintained their culture and traditions by hanging traditional cultural artefacts such as lanterns at house/shop fronts. Mike, a lantern craftsman, stated:

> "I make these red lanterns myself [see Figure 1] and hang them in my house and shop. I maintain the cultural image. It's a norm for us. Like the temples, they also hang lanterns because they represent our culture."

Figure 1: Handmade lanterns (Photo source: T. W. S. Ong).

In Mike's statement, the lanterns have two roles: they reflect the history of a location or place and serve a particular purpose. In the past, migrants lived together in their respective clan house, which usually included a section transformed into a temple for praying to Gods and ancestors.

Lanterns were hung in front of the clan houses, as the migrants believed the information would be sent to the respective Gods, informing them which clan group lived there and the daily happenings. These lanterns were lit using fire and would brighten the dark streets because there was no electricity in those days. Today, lanterns are hung in front of houses for decorative purposes, especially during the Lunar New Year festival. Owing to technological innovations, they are electrically- or battery-operated.

Supporting Mike's statement, Richard explained:

> "The display of lanterns [see Figure 2] shows that the Chinese culture is still alive and the Chinese feel comfortable about themselves. It's the nature and characteristics of a small community. They want to preserve their culture because this is a Malay-dominant country. They feel very insecure and want to preserve their own identity. They fight to preserve their language too."

Figure 2: Lanterns hung at a house front (Photo source: T. W. S. Ong).

According to Richard, the display of lanterns at the house front symbolises the Chinese's perseverance and resilience in maintaining culture, language, and identity in Malaysia. He noted the insecure feeling experienced by them in terms of political power, language, and ethnic status in regards to being a smaller community (Chinese) vis-a-vis the dominant population (Malays), which causes insecurity in the projection of the community's identity. Similar emotions are experienced by other Chinese communities, particularly when migrating to a new country. A study by Li (1998) reporting on the Chinese Indonesian community, who had migrated to the Netherlands, found that they struggled to cultivate a shared sense of identity. Specifically, internal tensions were experienced with nationality, ethnicity, or a combination of both. Nevertheless, the display of lanterns continues to serve as a quintessential token of Chinese culture—packing a plethora of symbolic meanings, based on a shared history, with a fluid transmission through generations within the Chinese Malaysian community.

3.2 Historical Artefacts

Similarly, name planks are also used to represent the Chinese's historical identity. A name plank is a piece of wood engraved with a family surname and usually hung on house fronts (Goh, 2015). The surname is a testimony of the family lineage and origin, such as the dialect group the family belongs to and the geographical location of the ancestors' origin. Goh (2015) reports that this practice is a form of showing appreciation and gratitude to the respective family's ancestors. According to Anna:

> "In the Chinese tradition, when you look at a name plank, you can tell which place the person came from and whether he is a Hakka, Cantonese, or Hokkien. In the past, when you visit someone's house, you can see a name plank hung at the front of his house. Nowadays, I don't see this being practised. Some people said this is an old-fashioned culture but it is actually very good. I always encourage people to continue this practice. However, today, it is very expensive to get someone to carve a name plank."

Anna noted that presently, certain families hang a name plank (*lu gou* – refers to Shandong province in China) in front of their house, as seen in Figure 3. Part of the reason is that it is costly to pay for the engraving, and many young and modern families consider such practice as traditional and old-fashioned. Thus, she called it a dying tradition.

Figure 3: A name plank hung at a house front (Photo source: T. W. S. Ong).

Another historical artefact is ancestral portraits, which are usually hung indoors. As observed during data collection, many old houses where families of generations live together hung ancestral portraits in their living rooms. Hao, a shop owner, said:

> "It's a family drawing [see Figure 4]. I hang [it] to represent our efforts to maintain the traditional system of the shop. We hold pride in ourselves for maintaining the old way of life, it has been going on for four generations. We tried to carry on all the traditions we learnt from our ancestors."

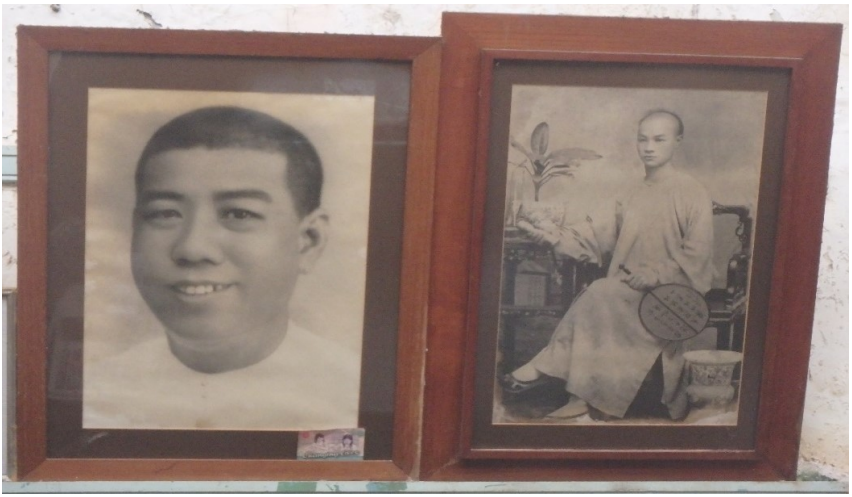

Figure 4: Ancestral portraits displayed at Hao's shop (Photo source: T. W. S. Ong).

Hao's statement emphasises maintaining the ancient lifestyle passed down through generations and his desire to keep it alive. During the interview, he stated that his great-grandparents came from China during the 19th century to work in the tin-mining industry in Perak. Subsequently, they moved to Penang and established a sundry shop that sold essentials. The business

grew more prominent and had four shareholders. During the Lunar New Year festival, they sold food imported from Hong Kong. Having benefited from a solid reputation over the years enabled them to secure returning customers for further purchases. However, with the increment of groceries purchases in supermarkets or online platforms, their sales have declined significantly. After four generations, the business continues operation but on a smaller scale. Nevertheless, the maintenance of a traditional interior and structure remains, such as using the abacus for calculating sales and the lighting system remained dim, similar to the olden days. The ancestral portraits hung in the office act as a form of respect and veneration for the elders in their family.

Both examples of the use of historical artefacts point to the identity developed by Anna and Hao as related to their group membership, which is the Chinese Malaysian community. They demonstrate that they are part of the social group where emotional significance, cultural appreciation, and recognition are enmeshed. Despite living in Malaysia, their new homeland, both participants also show a strong sense of inclusion and pride in their family history. Self-identity development can be complex due to influences of history and tradition blended with modernity.

3.3 Festival Artefacts

In addition to using cultural and historical artefacts to represent their identity, the Chinese Malaysian community uses festive artefacts to represent their materialisation of 'Chineseness.' The most significant festival is the Lunar New Year, commonly known in Malaysia as the Chinese New Year. The festival is celebrated at the beginning of a new lunar calendar year, which calculates months according to each moon cycle and lasts for 15 days. The festival's last day is known as *Chap Goh Mei* in the Hokkien dialect.

The Malaysian government declares two official bank holidays for the first and second days of the festival. Students are given approximately a week's holiday at schools, whether Chinese- or Malay-medium. Many living and working in major cities will return to their hometown to celebrate the festival with their extended family.

According to Qian and Huang (2009), Chinese New Year has been celebrated since the Neolithic age. Legend states that it began with some villagers fighting against a mythical dragon called *Nien* (年 – translated as 'year' in Mandarin). *Nien* appeared on the first day of the New Year and destroyed the villagers' crops and livestock. On the following New Year's Eve, to protect the crops and livestock, the villagers placed food in front of their doors for *Nien* to enjoy. A young boy dressed entirely in red chased *Nien* away, leading the villagers to believe that *Nien* was afraid of the red colour. Since then, the villagers would hang lanterns at house fronts whenever the New Year approached, and children would play with fireworks to scare *Nien* away. They would store food in excess because they were worried about being confined in their homes for days. Before they sat down for dinner, prayers would be offered to their ancestors for blessing and protection against misfortune. After practicing such traditions, *Nien* did not return, resulting in the villagers believing that *Nien* was successfully banished.

As mentioned, Penang is a city heavily influenced by Chinese culture, traditions, and language. Because the Chinese community dominates Penang (Penang Institute, 2020), Chinese New Year is celebrated on a large scale, with many home visits among family members and friends, open houses by the state government, and cultural events in shopping malls and clan houses. Anna described her way of celebrating:

"I put up lanterns and Chinese decorations like ang pows [see Figure 5]. I burn fireworks during the eve. Burning fireworks represents the festive and cheerfulness during Chinese New Year. It's our tradition."

Figure 5: Chinese New Year treats and *ang pows* for display (Photo source: T. W. S. Ong).

Anna's description contains three important festive artefacts: lanterns, *ang pows*, and fireworks. As discussed in the first theme (cultural artefacts), lanterns play an essential role in Chinese culture and have been used continuously until today. As for *ang pows*, married couples distribute them to children and unmarried couples during the festival. *Ang pows* are red envelopes filled with money, usually in even numbers, except for 'four' because it has a similar pronunciation to 'death' (死) in all Chinese dialects and Mandarin. Thus, *ang pows* are *ya sui qian*, which means "money that hinders bad spirit" (Qian & Huang, 2009, p. 280). The use of red coloured

envelopes signifies good fortune and good luck. Fireworks also serve two purposes: the adults burn them to keep away the evil spirits, and the children play for joy and happiness.

Mei added:

> "I decorate during Chinese New Year because of my grandchildren. I do it to provide a festive atmosphere. I will cook and serve only Chinese food. No Western food, no spaghetti! There will be fried noodles and vermicelli and the steamboat with sea cucumbers, prawns, scallops, and Chinese oysters, all that [see Figure 6]. I still serve them. It's like our Chinese culture. Culture, no matter what, doesn't go away. You are Chinese, therefore your culture is that."

Figure 6: Chinese New Year dinner (Photo source: T. W. S. Ong).

In Mei's statement, she stresses the relationship between her identity as Chinese and a culture that does not fade away. Although she claims to be lazy, she continues to create a celebratory atmosphere for her grandchildren to experience authentic Chinese culture. She also cooks traditional dishes such as seafood for the feast where her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren gather. According to Chinese tradition, having seafood during Chinese New Year symbolises abundance and prosperity. Although Western ideas have influenced Mei, she carries on her Chinese traditions and customs to present a Chinese cultural image. In Mei's case, the decorations and traditional dishes act as festive artefacts representing her identity, marking her as ethnically Chinese. Similarly, a Hakka participant in Ong's (2020) study mentioned that although the Hakka community in Penang has assimilated into the Malaysian culture, they continue serving traditional Hakka cuisine to perpetuate their Hakka culture and identity.

In Malaysia, it is common for family members to gather for a big feast on New Year's Eve—a symbol of "solidarity and harmony" (Goh, 2015, p. 138). Each dish carries a symbolic meaning according to the respective dialect group. For example, the Hokkiens eat long, thin noodles on the first day of Chinese New Year because they symbolise longevity. The Hakkas prepare minced fish meat stuffed in eggplant and beancurd (commonly known as tofu) because tofu denotes prosperity in the Hakka dialect. The Teochews make buns and biscuits in the shape of tortoise backs (representing longevity) and peaches (representing problem-solving and avoiding of misfortune). On the first day of the Chinese New Year, sons and daughters-in-law visit elders and senior family members to strengthen family ties. On these occasions, tangerines/mandarins, symbolising good fortune and

wealth, are brought to the respective houses as gifts. On the second day, married daughters 'return' home to their birth parents.' Through the descriptions by Anna and Mei, it is revealed that some traditions mentioned in the legend are still practiced and maintained, while the younger generation is gradually abandoning others, such as having traditional dishes. Nevertheless, the continuation of celebrating Chinese New Year according to traditions symbolises the maintenance and preservation of Chinese identity in the Malaysian context. As Matondang (2016, p. 66) states:

> "The celebration symbolises the revival of ethnic Chinese awareness in Malaysia as cultural identity within a multicultural society. The revival does not relate with the Mainland China political ideology, but it is more the embedded of cultural elements such as ancient tradition reconstructions neither structural change."

3.4 Scope of Findings

The results of the above study can be summarised in a chart, as shown in Figure 7.

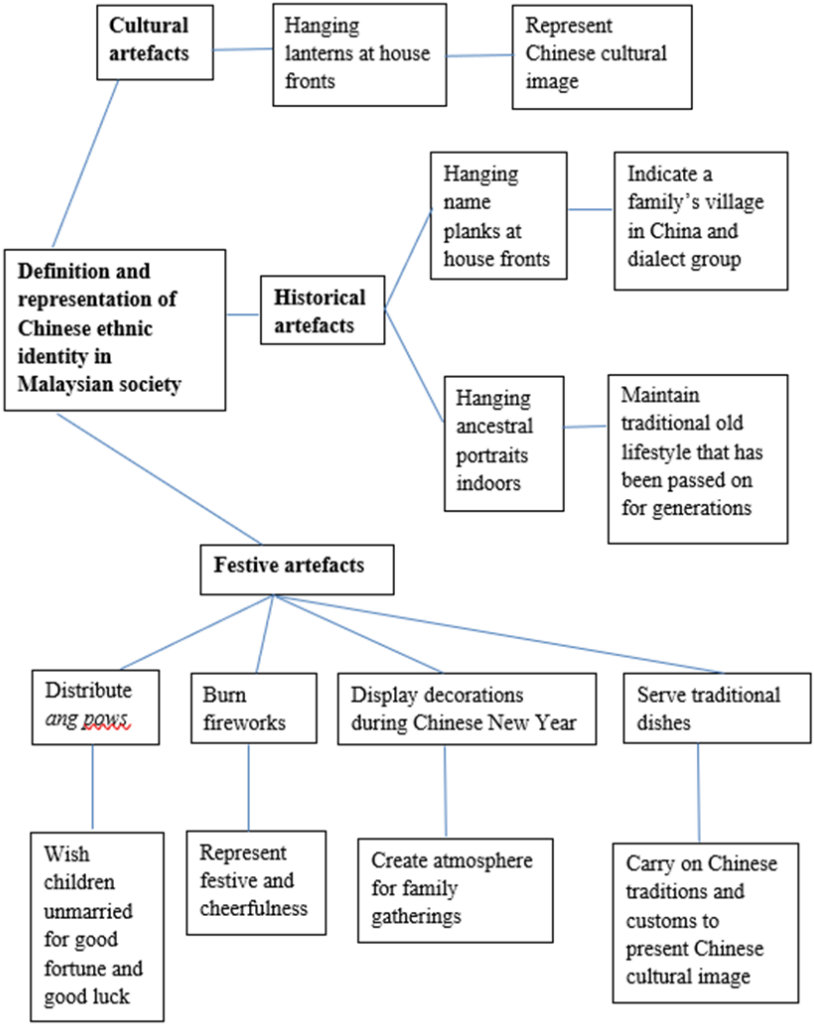

Figure 7: Types of artefacts defining and representing Chinese ethnic identity.

4. Conclusion

The limitation of this study is that only five Chinese participants in Penang were recruited. Nevertheless, these participants used cultural, historical, and festive artefacts to continue defining and representing their Chinese identity in Malaysia's contemporary racial political landscape. The artefacts were transmitted and used across generations in the five participants' families in the hope of maintaining/preserving the Chinese cultural and social identity in the new homeland where generations were born and grew up. They also acted as a form of respect and filial piety for the family history and ancestors. In short, these artefacts were part of the complex interplay of identity, culture, and belonging prevalent among them as Chinese Malaysians.

Different communities commonly celebrate their respective cultures, traditions, customs, and languages in a multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural country like Malaysia. This also applies to the Chinese community. The findings demonstrate that notwithstanding the partial disappearance of some aspects of Chinese culture, the five Chinese participants are keen on maintaining and transmitting their shared identity through the preservation and continued use of the three semiotic artefacts through generations. The changes may be due to various factors witnessed among the younger generation, from adopting a more Westernised, simplified, and technological lifestyle, to migrating abroad and interethnic marriages. Nevertheless, the continuity in practicing traditional cultures and educating the younger generation shows their resilience and determination in maintaining a broad generic Chinese identity and image within a largely racialised political context. All in all, the five participants exhibit a contemporary, fused identity, which, although they undergo internal and

external forces in the identity formation process, continue to maintain traditions and cultures passed down by ancestors while adopting the values of modern Malaysian society.

5. Acknowledgements

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