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Diasporic Insecurity as Constructional Framework for  
Chinese Political Identity in Colonial Malaya (1826-1957)

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**Abstract**

The ethnic Chinese in Malaysia have always been a politically conscious minority. Much of this was shaped during Malaysia's (Malaya) colonial period when the Chinese community began experiencing various social insecurities associated with life as a diaspora. For one, as a migrant minority in a colonial society, the Chinese faced various uncertainties over their ability to maintain their cultural identity in a multiethnic capitalist society. Additionally, their own contradictory ideas about their status in Malaya as well as their segmented experiences along socio-economic lines did not accord them any unity in deciding their own political future. Using theories in political identity-building among minorities, this essay provides a historical overview of how these insecurities have constructed for the Chinese diaspora a general framework for political identity-building in colonial Malaya. It shows that although the Chinese in colonial Malaya shared a common diasporic origin, they were nevertheless differentiated in their social outlooks and political activism.

**Keywords:** Chinese-Malaysians, diaspora, ethnic minority, political identity

This essay briefly explores the history of the Chinese in colonial Malaya.<sup>1</sup> It examines for the most part, the urban Chinese, since the growth of capitalism in colonial Malaya coincided with the expansion of cities and town. As a well-established immigrant diaspora, the Chinese in colonial Malaya navigated between maintaining their ancestral identity in an emerging urban-centered multicultural capitalist society and the struggle for political dominance in their adopted homeland. Colonial rule in its essence was not merely political subjugation of native and other non-European people over resources, labor, and markets. Like in other western colonies, colonization in Malaya entailed the suppression of modern citizenship rights of the colonized and the institutionalization of inequities along race and ethnic lines. Over time, the intersecting insecurities of the Chinese diaspora in colonial Malaya over their second-class status and their impending cultural disarticulation, together with their struggle to attain national and cultural prominence, would provide for them the constructional context for their political identity-building.

### **Social Insecurities as Framework for Political Identity-Building**

Historically examining the social insecurities of the urban ethnic Chinese in colonial Malaya requires a theoretical understanding of their experiences both as a diaspora and an ethnic group. The two concepts are interrelated in that they explain minority feelings of insecurity derived from experiences of marginalization in both power relations and identity. For any ethnic minority, uncertainties about access to full citizenship rights can put into doubt the longevity of their own existence as a culturally unique group (Steiner, 2009, pp. 99-100). In European colonial societies, ethnic subjects were never equals in either treatment or perception, and the physical and social distances enforced against them were a primary feature of their relationship with the colonizers (Feagin, 2010, pp. 38-39). Reasons for their subordinate status often emanated from the perceivably negative and threatening aspects of their race, ethnicity, or cultural origin as embodied in their customs, values, and physical appearance (Young, 1995, pp. 29-36). Since the colonized subject's cultural identity was often equated with characteristics deemed inferior to or incompatible with the standards and values of the occupier's culture, the maintenance of institutionalized exclusionary and discriminatory treatments against them was considered by the colonial state to be justified (Parillo, 2006).

The level of insecurity can be much more heightened for ethnic minorities who are also consciously proud and protective of their origins, such as the diaspora (Hall, 1990, pp. 227-30). A diaspora is an ethnic, racial, or cultural group whose members generally share a common culture, history, and national origin but who are also socially and politically dispersed through long-term residence in their respective homes abroad (Tajuddin and Stern, 2015, p. 352). Importantly, a diaspora lives with the knowledge that a permanent return to their original homes are no longer viable, or in many cases, even desirable. And although the overall identity of a diaspora may have been fused with the local cultures of its host countries, its primary features remain heavily constructed by the memory of their ancestral lands (Butler, 2001, pp. 209-210). As Robin Cohen (1996, p. 507) points out, the development of a diaspora's social identity reflects for the most part "a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its imagined location, history, and achievements." In Tajuddin and Stern's (2015, p. 35) study of the Dutch-Indonesian diaspora, it was shown that this consciousness of "home" propelled efforts among the younger generations to not only salvage their diminishing colonial heritage but also reconstruct it out of whatever has been left in memory and imagination. As long as what is

“imagined” is visibly translated in the daily practices and beliefs of the diaspora, the desire to maintain and preserve as much as possible the culture of the motherland becomes part of its social identity (Safran, 1991, pp. 88-89).

A period during which significant waves of diasporic migrations occurred was European colonialism. Sought as cheap labor or pushed toward economic opportunities abroad, the diaspora in colonial societies often found themselves living on the margins while faced with strong pressures to adapt to new cultural surroundings (Brah, 2005, p. 180). In some places however, the ethnic diaspora undertook the tasks of “middlemen minorities” to produce a social identity associated with economic success (Parrillo, 2006, p. 112). Here, strong ethnic sentiments, coupled with advantages of economic resources, enabled them to mobilize their community toward greater opportunities in education and modern employment (Esman, 2004, p. 43). The effort to elevate its social status while also preserving its cultural heritage would become a form of ethnic activism that challenges the state to do more than merely accommodate their participation in the economy. This includes attaining affirmative *recognition* of their culture’s constitutive identity as an equal part of the country’s or adoptive homeland’s national identity (Taylor, 1994, pp. 51-59; Sandel, 1984). This would allow, among other things, important aspects of its culture, tradition, and customs to be freely practiced and collectively recognized at par with that of other cultures (Kymlicka, 2004, pp. 37-38). Anything less would fall short of allaying the social anxieties surrounding the group’s unequal treatment and status.

Often however, not only does such a diaspora become subordinated by the colonial state but its relative prosperity would subject them to contempt and hostility from others (Parrillo, 2006, p. 111). These anxieties and the activism taken to protect both their collective security and economic interests would then shape the diaspora or ethnic group’s political identity. In other words, a group’s political affiliation too can be an important source of its political identity. The pursuit for equal citizenship and cultural recognition propels members to form, join, or identify with a particular association or party, whose philosophy is either aligned with or accommodates their own social-cultural interests. An example of this is shown in a study by Kuo, Malhotra, and Mo (2016, p. 21) on the salience of racial identity in the systemic exclusion and subtle discrimination of various Asian communities in America. Kou et al. (2016, pp. 24-26) went on to note that in their mobilization for political representation and activism, Asian-Americans have opted to de-emphasize their sub-ethnic identity in favor of their larger Asian identity. This has enabled them to act en masse in avoiding—and for some, abandoning—the Republican Party for its hostility toward minorities and immigrants, including economically-successful ones. In turn, the Asian community have gravitated toward the Democratic Party whose platform promises greater social inclusion and cultural recognition, thereby illustrating how political insecurities surrounding racial identity and economic interests become a driving force behind the development of a political identity rooted largely in the partisanship with a political party.

At the same time, the colonial state too can also be said to have possessed the power to shape minority and diaspora identities by restricting minority political participation or by reproducing stratified social structures that perpetually situate the group in positions of disadvantage (Hayward and Watson, 2010, pp. 19-20). This is because western colonialism was also a racializing project. It created and asserted European supremacy through social-institutional privileges exclusive and advantageous to “whites” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, pp. 197-98). By constructing a social system that was highly racialized, the colonial state managed to not only preserve the dominant power of Europeans but also subject minorities to perpetually inferior status, one that was articulated through its class position. Through time, an ethnic group’s

political identity development would also encompass its struggle against its historical location within capitalism's hierarchy. At this point, it is also important to be reminded that an ethnic group or diaspora is neither universal nor uniformed in its social and political experiences. Marginalization, for example, may vary—sometimes quite extensively—along the lines of sub-ethnicity, class, race, or religion. What often follow these differentiated experiences are contests over the nature and direction of political struggle that consequently result in a multiplicity of political identities within the ethnic group (Esman, 2004, pp. 21-24). Oftentimes, it can be said that the power of the elites in the particular group would likely supersede that of others in the determination of the community's social as well as political identity (Whitmeyer, 2002, pp. 333-36).

This essay will illustrate that the development of ethnic Chinese political identity during British colonialism in Malaya was premised on the social insecurities and activism associated with a marginalized but economically successful diasporic minority. Furthermore, according to Leo Suryadinata (2002, p. 61), the overseas Chinese (diaspora) identity developed as “the product of an incomplete national experience. . . . it encourages the Chinese to hold on to the traditions they already have, and seek to modernize in their own distinctive ways.” Likewise, the incomplete national experience of the ethnic Chinese in colonial Malaya has been historically expressed by collective anxieties caused by conflicting perceptions of culture, ethnicity, and national belonging.

### **Early Chinese Diaspora Identity**

The first Chinese settlers who arrived in the Malay sultanate of Malacca in the mid-fifteenth century did not face problems fitting in. Among the many successful merchants frequenting Malacca's vibrant port, these early Chinese married local women, took on native Malay customs, and settled on the outskirts of the city (Yen, 2002, pp. 6-7). Later known as *baba*, their successful acculturation and proficiency in the Malay language greatly facilitated their acceptance by the local community.<sup>2</sup> And as the sultanate's commerce grew in importance, so did their social position and status.<sup>3</sup>

In 1826, the British claimed their first territories in Malaya in the form of the British Straits Settlements, comprising the island of Penang, Dindings, Malacca, and Singapore.<sup>4</sup> Gradually, they entered into treaties with individual Malay rulers to consolidate their “protectorate” status over the Malay States.<sup>5</sup> The growth of the British East India trade lured many wealthy *babas* from Malacca to other parts of these Settlements. In 1896, the individual Malay states were federalized under the Federated Malay States but because these settlements remained direct British colonies, the local *babas* living there became subjects of the British Crown.<sup>6</sup> The growth of the capitalist economy now moved in tandem with the flourishing of *baba* commerce. While several of them owned large trading companies, others served as business middlemen serving British industrialists and engaging with Malay agricultural landlords. Through organizations such as the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA), the *babas* practically controlled the burgeoning local economy and gave themselves an identity as the first non-European capitalist elite in both Malaya and Singapore (Lee, 2009, pp. 167-69).<sup>7</sup>

The demand for Malayan tin and rubber in western industrial markets meant that there was a dire need for cheap labor in the plantations and mines throughout the Malay States. To meet the needs of a growing capitalist economy, the British imported thousands of cheap laborers from southern China (Yen, 1982, pp. 3-4). Planning their journeys as sojourners, many

were highly-committed to hard and laborious work in order to return home wealthy. Soon, the various Chinese diaspora throughout Southeast Asia emerged as a separate ethnic identity, collectively referred to by the name *Nanyang*.<sup>8</sup> The *Nanyang* Chinese were also diverse however, as they comprised a variety of southern dialects including Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, and Cantonese. Among them, the Hokkien stood out as the more economically successful since their tightly-knitted community practically controlled the rubber small-holding industry (Landa, 2016, p. 290).

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the identity of the Chinese in colonial Malaya had become a contested one. Descendants of *baba* Chinese, who had gained a socially advantaged position in the new capitalist economy, worked and identified closely with the British (Mackie, 2002). As British subjects, they took on a western lifestyle, wore western clothes, and enrolled their children in English schools, while priding themselves in their hybridized Chinese-Malay customs. This contrasted significantly with the later wave of Chinese migrants, who mostly worked in low-wage occupations and interacted entirely within their respective clan groups. Although the *babas* honored their Chinese heritage, they also considered their poorer China-born brethren to be *sinkek* (uncouth), and thus made great efforts to maintain social distances between them (Tan, 2004, pp. 112-15).

In due time however, the later Chinese arrivals began to take advantage of the opportunities availed to them in the new economy to become successful businessmen themselves. If the China-born had initially been a transient community, many now stood to economically gain from long-term residence in Malaya and Singapore. Through their clan-based enterprises and commercial guilds, they established a new support system of local capitalists, whose business skills and knowledge even the British were not able to match (Tajuddin, 2012, p. 58). By the second decade of the twentieth century, they would provide the operational backbone of Malayan capitalist development through their monopoly of local retail, small banking, and wholesale enterprises (Shaari and Ragayah, 1990, pp. 102-103). As superordinate communities, they now became the new comprador class in Malaya and Singapore, providing essential and circulatory capital for the newly emerging modern economy. Among the prominent figures included Tan Kah Kee, a Hokkien from Fujian province, and Yap Ah Loy, a mining magnate, whose names have been synonymous with both wealth and philanthropy. In Malaya and Singapore, this new consciousness inspired the establishment of numerous cultural organizations, schools, and news organs such as the *Nanyang Press*, whose general coverage primarily centered on events in China. As their numbers burgeoned and overwhelmed the Malay-speaking *babas*, these newer Chinese now mocked the *babas* for their Malayanized culture, and thus, for not being “pure” Chinese (Tan, 2004, p. 96).

### **Class, Ethnonational Anxieties, and Political Identity**

The initial identity of the Chinese in colonial Malaya was fragmented along three traditional and vertically-structured occupational groups. Wang Gungwu (1970) noted that the top stratum comprised a circle of privileged merchants, bankers, and heads of business guilds and associations. This group also included those who came from or married into the *baba* lineage. As an affluent class, their interests were very much grounded in the development of the local capitalist economy. Below them and in the middle was a grouping of Chinese-educated professionals as well as teachers mostly imported from China to service the Chinese-language schools. This group was vital in setting the political direction for the Chinese diaspora toward

China, and many were, in fact, commissioned by the Chinese government to solicit both political and financial support from the *Nanyang* community (Tan, 1997, p. 15). Finally, occupying the bottom rung were, for the most part, urban artisans and general workers hired by others as low-paid labor.

Despite the shared nature of their occupational experiences, there did not initially appear to be any solidarity between members across sub-ethnicity or dialect groups (Mak, 1997, p. 182). But it is quite safe to say that the middle occupational group would later assume the intelligentsia role in politically mobilizing a sizeable portion of the bottom-tiered population toward an increasingly China-centered consciousness (Yen, 2002, pp. 141-49). A large part of this can be attributed to the early anxieties felt by the educated group about what they saw as the harmful influences of colonialism and westernization on Chinese culture, especially upon the younger generation (Trocki, 1990, pp. 10-12). These outlooks certainly resonated among the poorer segments, given the majority were uneducated and still harbored dreams of returning home with their aspired riches. For many, even among the middle educated group, there was still the cognitive inability to separate the concepts of country (*guojia*) and community (*minzu*) (Tan, 1988).<sup>9</sup> Being Chinese in Malaya, in other words, elicited little in terms of communal belonging to their adoptive land. Instead, strong notions of filial piety automatically suggested to them that Malaya was either a temporary abode or an extension of the mainland itself. Thus the natural mindset among the diaspora was that all paths of loyalty and obligation should remain toward China. Any suggestion that a large Chinese community would submit their sovereignty to foreigners would simply have been unthinkable (Pye and Pye, 1985, p. 251).

The capitalist system inevitably transformed this traditional grouping into a more visible urban class structure consisting of the capitalist elites at the top, the professionals in the middle, and the working class at the bottom. The difference in status somewhat also paralleled the various political orientations of the ethnic Chinese in Malaya before 1930 (Wang, 1970, p. 255). This was primarily due to the diasporic concerns of the Chinese-educated middle class as well as the working class in particular, being substantially different from that of the upper class. While members of the upper-tier had significant cultural attachments to the “motherland,” they were also accommodative of the notion of being Malayan (Yen, 1982, pp. 415). This was not surprising given their massive mercantile interests in Malaya. The English-educated among them were even more flexible. Within this group included those with *baba* origins, who predated the newer arrivals and were more (pro-British) Malayan than they were devoted to China. Their members served and worked with the British in various capacities, including as local Chinese appointees in the esteemed State Councils (Tajuddin, 2012, p. 32).<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, the Chinese-educated middle-class had taken on the role of vanguards of Chinese culture. Driven by a primordial connection to the mainland, these “educationists” remained firm that the future of Malaya should be inextricably tied to China. Through their efforts, this group was able to solicit the cooperation of the elite class in ensuring financial support for China for a wide array of purposes ranging from political donations to disaster relief. Remittance to China totaled more than U.S. \$600 million from 1926 to 1937, and were largely sourced from capitalist funds raised and managed through an efficient network of business associations, agency houses, shipping companies, and banks (Cheong, Lee, and Lee, 2013, pp. 75-6). Within Malaya and Singapore, monetary contributions from business guilds and associations such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce were channeled substantially into Chinese education. In a relatively short time, the number of Chinese schools dramatically rose from 240 in 1921 to 1,050 in 1938 (Tan, 2002, pp. 156-57).

The Chinese educationists were also anxious about the volatility of the Chinese imperial institution amidst ongoing rebellions in the mainland. The emperor was considered the supreme symbol of Chinese culture, and as such, they saw an imperative need to bolster his status among the diaspora in Malaya (Yen, 1982, pp. 410-12). To achieve this, the Chinese educationists facilitated the entry of various reformist ideologies from China into Malaya, many of which contained principles consistent with Confucian orthodoxy (Yen, 1982, pp. 399). The first point of dissemination were the Chinese schools, followed by several Chinese associations, all of whom sought to cultivate these principles as the primary basis of their political identities (Cheah, 2003, p. 8). Nevertheless, as the Chinese Empire disintegrated, the reformist agenda too waned and gradually disappeared with it.

By the early 1920s, Sun Yat-Sen's revolutionary party, the Kuomintang (KMT) was gaining massive support in China. The impressive pull of the KMT lay in its *Sanmin Zhuyi* (Three Principles) philosophy that emphasized a new form of Chinese ethno-consciousness based on the adaptation of traditional Chinese culture to the modern concepts of nationalism, democracy and self-sufficiency (Strand, 1997, pp. 332-36). In this respect, the KMT was considerably successful in unifying the Chinese people through a common identity when they came to power in 1927. Accordingly, the Chinese educationists in Malaya, who understood the significance of a well-organized polity among the Chinese diasporic society, again mobilized the local community in line with the political happenings in China. Almost immediately, the KMT attained widespread following among the Chinese diaspora in Malaya, with the business elites providing financial support for party activities. These included the building and financing of the KMT affiliates in Malaya (Malayan KTM or MKMT), which by 1921 reached nearly 30,000 members across Malaya and Singapore (Harper, 1999, pp. 33-34).

The capitalist class's generous contributions were by no means a display of unconditional loyalty to China. Rather, it was a way to sustain their leadership position within the diaspora and keep the working class politically and economically dependent (Huat, 2006, pp. 75-76). With so much invested in Malaya, the elite's main focus remained grounded on their businesses. Building a tightly-controlled local Chinese community served to benefit them in terms of both labor and markets. Such political behavior resembled that of many other diaspora, whose gains from either assimilation or cooperation with the state seemed to outweigh the losses experienced from gradual dissipation of their ancestral identity (Esman, 2004, p. 125-26). It was to no surprise that the political identity of the Chinese elites in Malaya would later be steered in greater alignment with issues related to class rather than race or culture.

In any case, this tremendous outflow of money and support to the Chinese government was truly a reflection of the Chinese diaspora's economic strength and political organization. This undoubtedly worried both the British and Malays (Andaya and Andaya, 2001, pp. 225-26). The British, especially, were intent on staying the course of protecting the political position of the Malay rulers, through whose legitimacy they indirectly governed Malaya. Any disruption in this political arrangement was seen to threaten British interests not only in Malaya but also Singapore. This was not lost on the mercantile elites of the MKMT, who had been at the forefront of these remittances to China. Since their own economic interests in Malaya were significantly dependent upon their relationship with the colonial authorities, the older and more moderate leaders in the party took steps to gradually distance themselves with the parent party in China (Huat, 2006, p. 47).



### Chinese Political Identity in a Racialized Colonial Structure

By 1930, the political identity of the Chinese in Malaya was still very much premised on their partisanship with the MKMT (Yong and McKenna, 1990). That was about to change in the years leading to the Second World War. Firstly, the exclusively China focus of a new line of leadership within the MKMT not only consolidated the Sino-centric approach of the party but it also caused many in the local diaspora to feel increasingly disaffected with its objectives and aims. What they wanted was a political schema centered on enhancing the experiences of being *Chinese in Malaya* rather than Chinese in China. This was not surprising given that by the 1930s, the Chinese diaspora in Malaya had begun to establish their own social identity reflected quite visibly in the fused nature of their culture found in food, customs, language, and even beliefs and superstitions (Chien and Sharim, 2016).

Secondly, the MKMT was faced with another political contender in the form of the Malayan Communist party (MCP). As a regional branch of the Communist Party of China (CCP), it was declared illegal by the British in 1930, after which many of its members found their way into various Chinese organizations across Malaya and Singapore (Tajuddin 2012, p. 124). The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 brought the KMT and CCP tentatively together under the National Salvation Front, and this truce was emulated in Malaya between the nationalists and communists. This allowed many MCP leaders access to MKMT members, who began to endear themselves to the communist cause in Malaya. This was especially so since the MCP's ultimate aim was in establishing in Malaya a Chinese satellite state, which meant that their long-term focus was increasingly local in nature (Bayly and Harper, 2007, p. 141).

Since the communists were deprived of a political machinery, they mostly worked their way into the various civic organizations and newspapers, where they successfully mobilized various campaigns relevant to the welfare of Chinese workers (Hara, 1997, pp. 41-45). Importantly, several also managed to infiltrate into local Chinese schools, whose mounting anti-British activism quickly gained them notoriety as breeding grounds for militancy. This anti-colonial attitude, goaded by the communists, was driven by a vision that certainly resonated with a significant number of the diaspora, one which pointed to an independent and Chinese-dominated communist state in Malaya (Hack, 2001, p. 115). In this respect, the communists seemed to respond more realistically than the MKMT to the social insecurities and political incongruity of the community, who as much as they wanted to remain attached to their motherland, were also insecure about their own future as Chinese in a multicultural Malaya (Chan, 2014, p. 37).

In relation to this, another concern of the Chinese diaspora pertained to their own status and position in the new multicultural Malaya, where reconciling the modern notions of nation (*minzu*) and state (*guojia*) necessitated the understanding of where they stood in terms of power and identity. As the capitalist economy became firmly established in Malaya, a racialized labor hierarchy also emerged. As part of the colonial division of labor, Europeans occupied the high-status positions, followed by the ethnic Chinese, who mostly took on the middle-income urban trades, while ethnic Indians worked the lowest paid plantation jobs (Tajuddin, 2012, pp. 64-65). Save for the royal aristocrats, the masses of indigenous Malays were confined mostly to subsistence agriculture and generally disconnected from the emerging capitalist economy (Roff, 1990, pp. 110-13; Alatas, 1983). This stratification system was not only an important determinant of an ethnic group's life chances but it was also accompanied by a colonial prestige ranking of race and ethnicity (Kratoska, 1983, pp. 165-166). The colonial narrative validating

these inequalities was one that typically represented the ideas of the day about race and culture. It assigned to each racial and ethnic group social meanings relating to behavior and aptitude. For example, William Pickering, the first Chinese Protector in Malaya, once remarked that the possibility of Malays governing the Chinese was likened to “white settlers of America submitting to the rule of Indian chiefs” (Emerson, 1964, p. 503). While this ideology served to explain, most of all, European racial supremacy, it also reinforced age-old Chinese prejudices against dark-skinned communities (Tan, 2004, p. 171; Pye, 1991, p. 450).

Hence, unlike the period of the earlier *babas*, the colonial era Chinese immigrants saw neither necessity nor value in assimilating into Malay culture, especially since Malays were now an occupied and impoverished people. For that matter, the Malays too always considered the Chinese as “guests” who one day would all return to their homelands. Furthermore, the demography in colonial Malaya was highly segregated with each ethnic group residing in their own respective enclaves—Malays in the countryside, Indians in plantations, the Chinese in towns and mining areas, and Europeans in their exclusive “little Europes” (Tajuddin, 2012, p. 64). Scant interaction between them perfunctorily preserved each group’s customs and endogamous tendencies, thereby reinforcing their ethnocentric worldviews and sentiments. To the Chinese, ethnic identity had always meant maintaining full cultural attachments to the ancestral mainland (Pye, 1991). Since their numbers in Malaya were substantially large, it also explained their general inability to fathom the idea of their existence within a diverse society, one in which the Malay sultans reigned as supreme cultural symbols (Harper, 1999, p. 8; Tan, 1988). For the economically successful, in particular, the desire to remain in Malaya became increasingly compelling. But to accede to the institutional hegemony of the Malays, whose culture and history they considered inferior, was at the same time exceptionally objectionable.

The Japanese occupation during the Second World War (1942-1945) brought unprecedented hardships for Malayans of every walk of life. The Chinese diaspora was especially singled out for torture and execution due to their historical enmity with the Japanese. While the rich among them were able to evade persecution through bribery and forced alliances, many others had to flee to the rural areas as a means to escape their occupiers’ atrocity (Cheah, 2003, pp. 41-44). In the midst of this turbulent period, there emerged the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), the armed wing of the MCP, whose resistance against the Japanese may have been effectively minimal but whose exemplary willingness to defend their community in Malaya won the MCP favors with both the British and a majority of the Chinese diaspora (Chin and Hack, 2005, pp. 61-63). The end of the war saw the MCP accordingly rewarded by the British with legalization of their political status. With the demise of the MKMT by 1941, and aided by its wartime reputation, the MCP emerged the most powerful Chinese-dominated political organization in Malaya. This appeal was further enhanced when remnants of the MPAJA were given the mandate by the British to temporarily assist in the country’s policing responsibilities just after the war. The outcome, however, was disastrous. In many places, it entailed incidents of communist retributions against suspected Japanese collaborators, many of whom were Malay villagers living on the fringes of the jungle (Andaya and Andaya, 2001, p. 253). This series of atrocities never faded in the minds of Malays for years to come and only served to exacerbate the already tenuous relationship between the two ethnic groups.

Ethnic relations were seriously tested in 1946 when the British embarked on the Malayan Union plan to prepare the country with their preferred course for independence. Voices in London calling for greater centralization had convinced policy-makers that such a political structure in Malaya would be expedient for both trans-Malayan commerce and national political

administration (Smith, 1995, pp. 150-53). A significant change involved greater central government powers over the individual Malay states, thus drastically changing and replacing the old federated Malayan state structure in which the sultans maintained their cultural sovereignty. This plan, of course, was accompanied by serious controversies. Among other things, there was the contentious proposal to extend almost unconditional naturalization to millions of ethnic Chinese and Indians, which would have resulted in the current Malay population becoming outnumbered in Malaya. More serious was how the Malay sultans were forced to sign away their institutional powers as heads of states (Tajuddin, 2013, p. 101-2). This republican structure troubled the Malay elites since it indirectly implied their own political primacy in Malaya would likely be compromised (Omar, 1993, p. 49). Within a year, they joined forces with other Malay movements under an umbrella association called the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO). Transformed into a political party, UMNO felt strong enough to threaten the British with force if need be in order to dismantle the Malayan Union. With Malay anger simmering, the British were not about to risk their long-term political economic interest in Malaya with further suppression. As a result, UMNO successfully attained the repeal of the Union, and in its place proposed a return to a federated structure under a Federation of Malaya Agreement. Among other things, the party also called for the reinstatement of the status of the Malay sultans and for the revocation of liberal citizenship laws under the Union. The British relented, clearing the path for UMNO to push ahead with Malaya's independence, one that was premised on its fiery slogan of "Malaya for Malays" (Abdullah, 1985, p. 57)

### **Ethnic Chinese Political Identity in Post-War Malaya**

The Chinese diaspora could have exploited the Malayan Union to their benefit, but their partisanship to the MCP—who attacked it for being too conservative—completely blinded them from realizing its true potentials (Lee, 2008, p. 55). Having been overtaken by events preceding the Federation Agreement, the Chinese found themselves in a situation where their political identification with the MCP may well have jeopardized the possibility of greater inclusion in talks for Malaya's impending independence. Indeed, the colonial authorities had not only sidelined and banned the MCP, but they had also been intensifying the surveillance of numerous Chinese-led organizations, including major trade unions such as the MCP-helmed Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU) (Freedman, 2000, p. 60). Subsequently, the British dismantled the PMFTU and suspended all union memberships across Malaya and Singapore until their links with the MCP were effectively severed.

As the course of events toward the Federation Agreement began to materialize, the MCP formed a coalition under the Singapore-based All-Malayan Council for Joint Actions (AMCJA). This conglomeration of associations incorporated English-educated Chinese organizations such as the SBCA, whose pressing concerns revolved around the proposed retraction of favorable citizenship terms for non-Malays (Verma, 2002, pp. 60-61). More remarkably, there was also the brief but successful collaboration between the AMCJA and Malay leftists from the People's Labor Centre (PUTERA), who were brought together by a common opposition against the conservative UMNO-British pact (Hussain, Mustapha, and Jomo, 2005, p. 342). In any case, the economy was on an upturn, with employment rising and general quality of life also stabilizing. With decline in union membership and prospects of an UMNO-led independence confidently looming, the overall challenge to halt the Federation of Malaya Agreement failed quite dismally. The agreement came into effect in 1948 and the coalition disbanded.

The MCP was fast losing its war of attrition in the urban areas, hastening its leader Chin Peng to proclaim in 1948 an armed insurgency from within the jungles of Malaya. The character of the MCP's insurrection was itself ethnicized; the communists maintained its overwhelmingly Chinese membership while a significant segment of the colonial constabulary consisted of Malays. Furthermore, Chinese residents living on the outskirts of cities were heavily involved in providing communist agents, called *min yuen*, with important information and rations (Comber, 2008, p. 79).<sup>11</sup> This provided proof to many who suggested that Chinese political identity had not really moved away from the MCP despite the party's declining membership. To the Malays, the ethnonational aspirations of the Chinese through communism manifested their "untrustworthiness" in terms of loyalty to Malaya. The aggregating effects of these events relayed to them that the Chinese had more than "outstayed" their presence and needed to be curtailed of their rights or expelled altogether. To the British, it justified their declaration of a state of emergency in 1948, during which the use of strategies to suppress the communists involved measures considered drastic by today's standards. This included the Briggs Plan, which aimed at stemming the support networks of the MCP through the internment of tens of thousands of Chinese in the countryside in secured settlements called "new villages" (Nagl, 2002, p.72-74).

The victory of the communists in China in 1949 was as much a source of motivation for the MCP as it was a matter of pride for many who relished in the long-awaited reunification of their motherland. The growing euphoria resulted in thousands attempting to return to China although many were also turned back, especially the poor (Chan, 2014, pp. 40-41). Those who remained were still hopeful for a positive outcome through the MCP. But effective counter-insurgency following a 1951 MCP-directed assassination of Sir Henry Gurney, the High Commissioner of Malaya, critically weakened both the party and the morale of its followers (Ongkili, 1985, p. 79). The rise of Malay nationalism, backed by a cautious British policy to ensure that a post-colonial government served to safeguard their economic interests in Malaya, effectively hampered the efforts by China-centered nationalists to construct an identity in Malaya that was strongly attached to the motherland. Having been stigmatized by their affiliation with the MCP and left feeling uneasy with the systemic scrutiny it received from both the colonial authorities and the Malay ruling elites, the Chinese diaspora would become increasingly insecure about their status and identity in the new Malaya. Caught in a dilemma of identity, they would momentarily lose their political direction.

This dilemma would be partially resolved in the years leading to Malaya's independence by the English-educated elite, who had become overtly open to cooperation with the British in ushering in an independent and capitalist Malaya. The British too recognized the necessity for an ally among the Chinese to steer the poor and politically-susceptible away from radical indoctrination. They found one in the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), comprising men from the English-educated and business elite such as Tan Cheng Lock, Henry H. S. Lee, and Ong Yoke Lin (Carstens, 2006, p. 124). With their large assets, the MCA was able to fund many of the social amenities delivered to the new villages. The party was also credited for fostering a new political direction among many Chinese groups, one that was grounded on conditional citizenship in an independent Malaya. This began when the MCA entered into a consociational power-sharing relationship in 1952 with UMNO (Tajuddin, 2012, pp. 110-111). While the latter possessed tremendous political influence, the MCA was unrivaled in wealth and finance. The coalition, named the National Alliance, was extremely successful. In 1955, it won the country's first pre-independence elections.

In drafting the Federal Constitution, an agreement was reached between the parties to recognize the special position of Malays with regards to land proprietorship and civil administration. Islam was also proclaimed Malaya's official religion and Malay its national language. In return, full citizenship was conferred to eligible members of the Chinese, Indian, and other non-Malay communities, along with guarantees of cultural, educational, and vernacular autonomies for each of these groups (Tajuddin, 2012, p. 109). It was definitely not what the majority ethnic Chinese desired, but at this point, it was the only option they had. Malaya's independence in 1957 offered a formal place for the Chinese community, but one that was conditional upon their secondary citizenship. One could argue that the insecurities associated with a changing political economic environment may have allowed the Chinese elite to prioritize their own class interests and consolidate their position within the community. But in doing so, they were also constructing for the Chinese diaspora a new political identity, one which would temporarily alleviate some of the insecurities of culture and belonging. This required them to accept that they were no longer just Chinese in Malaya but rather, to embrace the idea of becoming Chinese-Malayan.

### Conclusion

This essay provides a brief examination of political identity-building among the Chinese diaspora in colonial Malaya. The case study offers three important points. The first relates to how social-historical factors embedded in colonization, capitalism, and nation-formation had brought on serious disruptions to the diaspora's sense of belonging and identity. The difficulty they faced in reconciling their ancestral obligations with modern expectations of citizenship and statehood gave rise to feelings of insecurity relating to their cultural and ethnic place in a highly stratified capitalist society. Secondly, despite their social and political marginalization, the Chinese possessed sufficient economic resources as well as social consciousness to enable them to politically mobilize and address their social-cultural anxieties. Their changing affiliations with various political leanings, however, were primarily a reflection of the internal uncertainties occurring between their staunch ethno-cultural attachment to China and their increasing social-economic interests in Malaya. Third, class and educational influences also played a role in dividing the diaspora's political orientation as did the opposing interests of the colonial state and Malay elites, whose increasing powers served to also shape the nature and extent of their political activism. All these diasporic insecurities formed an incomplete national experience rooted in the Chinese diaspora's profound disinclination to socially or culturally identify with their adopted land, which in turn, created a framework for the group's political identity-building.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this analysis, Malaya comprises primarily the states on the Malay Peninsula.

<sup>2</sup> The word *baba* is also referred to as *Peranakan*, or someone (Chinese) born in the Malay world.

<sup>3</sup> These Malay-assimilated Chinese are also known as the *Peranakan* (born in the Malay states).

<sup>4</sup> Malaya is geographically the old name for, and later, the western part of modern Malaysia. It comprised the Federated Malay States of Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang; the Unfederated Malay States of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Johor; and the British Straits Settlement. Singapore is unofficially included in the reference to Malaya, but is officially the capital of the Straits Settlements.

<sup>5</sup> The Protectorate was a form of indirect colonial rule.

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<sup>6</sup> The Straits Settlements remained direct British colonies until 1946.

<sup>7</sup> From 1896 to 1963, Malaysia was known as Malaya. After 1963, Federation of Malaysia comprised of Malaya, and the Northern Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah.

<sup>8</sup> The name Nanyang refers to southern sea (Southeast Asia) Chinese diaspora.

<sup>9</sup> *Guojia* refers to the concept of national belonging, while *minzu* refers to a small group or community or minority.

<sup>10</sup> These were created by the British as seemingly multiethnic legislative bodies but whose elitist composition made them de facto rubber-stamping committees of the colonial government.

<sup>11</sup> The term *min yuen* means “people’s movement” in Mandarin.

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