

Cultural inheritance, identity reconstruction and social integration: A transgenerational narrative study of Chinese families in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamic process of cultural inheritance, identity reconstruction and social integration experienced by Chinese families in Malaysia during the process of transgenerational migration. Through in-depth interviews with 15 Chinese families in Malaysia spanning three generations, this paper analyzes the inheritance and changes of Chinese culture in these families in a multicultural context, as well as the differences between different generations in cultural identity, language use and identity construction. The study found that over time, the cultural identity of Chinese in Malaysia gradually shifted from a strong Chinese cultural identity to a more diversified identity, showing the complexity of cultural integration and identity reconstruction. This study not only enriches our understanding of the Chinese community in Malaysia, but also provides a new perspective for the broader study of transgenerational migration.

Keywords

Chinese Malaysians, Intergenerational Studies, Cultural Transmission, Identity, Narrative Studies.

1. Introduction

The transgenerational migration experience is a complex and dynamic process involving cultural inheritance, rupture and reconstruction, and the continuous negotiation of individual and collective identities. The Chinese community in Malaysia, as a unique case, demonstrates the depth and breadth of this process. From the large-scale immigration wave that began in the late 19th century to the Chinese families that have been rooted in Malaysia for several generations today, their experiences not only reflect the adaptation strategies of individuals and families, but also profoundly shape the multicultural landscape of Malaysia.

Although there is a rich accumulation of research on Malaysian Chinese, there is still a significant research gap in the in-depth understanding of their intergenerational immigration experience, especially through the exploration of narrative perspectives. Based on intergenerational interviews with five Malaysian Chinese families, this study aims to explore the cultural inheritance, rupture and reconstruction processes in these families through narrative research methods. We pay special attention to the dynamics of cultural transmission, value conflicts and identity reshaping between different generations.

2. Research Background

(1) Historical Overview of the Chinese Community in Malaysia

Early Immigrants (15th century-early 19th century)

The earliest Chinese immigrants in Malaysia can be traced back to the voyages of Zheng He during the Ming Dynasty in the 15th century. They mainly came from the coastal areas of

southern China, such as Fujian and Guangdong provinces. They were mostly merchants, craftsmen and laborers [1].

British Colonial Period (19th century-mid-20th century)

Before independence, Malaysia was ruled by European colonists. The Portuguese and Dutch first arrived and established trading ports, and then the British took over and controlled Malaya until independence in 1957. However, the Malays were considered as "lazy, unwilling to work for wages and therefore could not be considered a potential pool of labour for the colonial economy" [2]. Therefore, Britain began to promote immigration from China and India. The Chinese began to establish businesses in Malaysia, such as tin mining and rubber plantation, and played an important role in them. However, after the end of British colonial rule, the Chinese and Indians did not return to their own countries, but stayed in the local area to form a community structure based on dialect groups (such as Fujianese, Cantonese, Hakka, etc.)

World War II (1941-1945)

Japan began to invade Southeast Asia and quickly occupied Malaya, and the Chinese community suffered severe persecution. At that time, many Chinese joined the anti-Japanese guerrillas and created many forces such as the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army.

Before and after independence (1945-1970s)

The Federation of Malaya became independent in 1957, but at that time no race other than Malaysians was recognized. Malaysia was established in 1963, which included Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. During this period, the Chinese participated in the political process and established political parties such as the Malaysian Chinese Association. After the "May 13 Incident" in 1969, the implementation of the New Economic Policy greatly affected the economic status of the Chinese in Malaysia.

Modern Development (1980s to Present)

Malaysian Chinese continue to play an important role in the economy, education and culture. Faced with challenges such as cultural identity and language education, Malaysian Chinese have always adhered to their original intentions. At the same time, they have actively participated in national construction and promoted the development of a multicultural society.

(2) Multicultural Social Background of Malaysia

Overview of Multicultural Social Background of Malaysia

Malaysia has become a multi-ethnic country since the 19th century. The main ethnic groups are Malays (about 50%), Chinese (about 23%), Indians (about 7%), indigenous peoples (about 11%, mainly in Sabah and Sarawak), as well as other ethnic minorities and foreigners. The main language is Malay, and its official language is English (widely used in business and higher education). There are other major languages: such as Chinese (and various dialects), Tamil, various indigenous languages, etc. Malaysia has religious diversity, including Islam (about 60% of the population), as well as other religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism, etc. Malaysia has a high degree of cultural integration. In terms of food culture, the characteristics of various ethnic groups are integrated, forming Nyonya cuisine. In terms of festivals, important festivals of all ethnic groups are public holidays.

In 1971, Malaysia implemented the New Economic Policy, which aims to reduce the economic gap between ethnic groups. It also promoted the concept of "One Malaysia". The purpose is to balance the interests of various ethnic groups and thus maintain cultural diversity.

Malaysia's education system is very rich. There are national schools, which use Malay as the main teaching language. There are also national schools that use Chinese and Tamil as the main teaching language. There are also some international schools and private higher education institutions.

Influenced by multiculturalism, Malaysia's economy has formed a diversified human resource, thus attracting a lot of foreign investment. More foreign tourists come to Malaysia for tourism because of multiculturalism. [2]

3. Research Questions

The inheritance and changes of Chinese culture in Malaysian Chinese families

The inheritance of Chinese culture in Malaysian Chinese families presents a colorful picture, with both adherence to tradition and adaptation to changes. In terms of the preservation of traditional culture, many families still use Mandarin and dialects to celebrate traditional festivals, such as the Lunar New Year and Qingming Festival. They also follow traditional customs and hold Chinese weddings. However, under the influence of education, social environment and globalization, language use, such as the increase in the use of English, is changing. At the same time, Malaysia's multicultural environment has promoted cultural exchanges and integration, such as the integration of food culture [3]. There are generational differences among Malaysian Chinese, including differences in cultural identity between the older and younger generations, and conflicts between traditional values and modern ideas.

Cultural rupture and adaptation faced by different generations.

As the times change, different generations of Malaysian Chinese have shown obvious differences in cultural identity and adaptation: The first generation of immigrants usually maintain a strong Chinese cultural identity and may face challenges in language and cultural adaptation. By the second generation, they have experienced a "crack" in the cultural growth process, and they have to adapt to local culture while maintaining family traditions, which may cause identity confusion. The third generation and later immigrants identify more with Malaysian local culture and may have a superficial understanding of Chinese culture, but they may also refocus on their own cultural roots due to the impact of globalization. This generational difference may lead to cultural rupture within the family, such as language barriers and conflicts in values. 3. Identity reconstruction and self-definition in a multicultural context Identity reconstruction and self-definition of Malaysian Chinese is a continuous evolutionary process, which presents complex and diverse characteristics in a multicultural context. Malaysian Chinese have multiple identities, including ethnic identity, national identity and cultural identity, which are both integrated and tense. In terms of language use and educational choices, it reflects the changes in identity, such as the increasing importance of multilingual skills. At the same time, while preserving traditional Chinese cultural practices, they are also adapting to the local environment, such as changes in the way festivals are celebrated. The enhancement of Malaysian Chinese citizenship awareness has promoted more active political participation, but it also requires balancing ethnic interests and national interests. The most important thing is the change in the self-definition of Malaysian Chinese, from simply "Chinese" to "Malaysian Chinese" and then to citizens with a global vision, which reflects the complexity of identity.

4. Research Methods

This paper uses narrative research methodology to conduct in-depth interviews and questionnaires on the third generation and later immigrants in Malaysia. This study selected 15 research subjects aged between 18 and 45.

5. The inheritance and changes of Chinese culture in Malaysian Chinese families

Retention of traditional cultural elements

The cultural inheritance of the Malaysian Chinese community has undergone a complex historical process. Early immigrants brought rich Chinese traditional culture, including language, customs, religious beliefs, etc. However, in the process of nation-building in the post-colonial period, the Chinese cultural identity consciousness faced challenges and adjustments. In terms of language, although many families still retain dialects or Mandarin as family languages, the status of Malay as the national language continues to rise, and English is also widely used. This has led to the diversification of language use. Important festivals such as the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival are still widely celebrated, but the form and content may be simplified or localized. The development of the Chinese education system has been tortuous, affecting the formal channels of cultural inheritance. At the same time, the core values of Confucianism such as filial piety and diligence still influence many families, but are also merging with modern values.

Localization of cultural practices

In the development of the Chinese in Malaysia, its food culture has shown significant integration, such as the development of Nyonya cuisine and the localization and innovation of traditional festival foods. Nyonya cuisine is a combination of Chinese cooking techniques and Malay spices. Representative dishes include laksa, Nyonya steamed fish, and belacan. Dragon Boat Festival rice dumplings have also gradually begun to use local ingredients (such as curry fillings), and the flavors of Mid-Autumn Festival mooncakes have been innovated (such as durian fillings). Religious beliefs have also undergone adjustments, and traditional beliefs, Buddhism, and Taoism have all been integrated with local elements. The belief in Guanyin is integrated with local elements, and the belief in Dabogong has also evolved into a local feature.

Generational differences in cultural inheritance

Language use has gradually shifted from dialect dominance to English popularization. The older generation mainly speaks dialect, supplemented by Mandarin, while the middle-aged generation mainly speaks Mandarin, and uses English and Malay. The younger generation generally speaks English, and their Mandarin proficiency varies greatly. The degree of cognition and practice of traditional customs shows a downward trend with each generation. The older generation is well versed in traditional customs and strictly abides by them. The middle-aged generation understands most customs and selectively practices them. The younger generation has cognition of some important customs, but practices them less. Cultural identity has gradually shifted from strong Chinese cultural identity to multicultural identity. The older generation has a strong Chinese cultural identity, the middle-aged generation has a dual identity of Chinese culture and Malaysian culture, and the younger generation is more inclined to multicultural identity, showing a global vision.

These changes reflect the efforts of the Malaysian Chinese community to find a balance between maintaining cultural traditions and adapting to modernization and globalization trends. It demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of culture, while also highlighting the challenges of cultural inheritance.

6. Cultural rupture and adaptation: comparison of intergenerational experience

Cultural adaptation strategies of the first generation of immigrants

The first generation of immigrants focuses on economic adaptation and cultural preservation. They learn Malay and English and retain the use of dialects. In terms of economy, they start from traditional industries and gradually expand their business networks. The construction of social circles is based on hometown associations and clan associations. In terms of cultural preservation, they emphasize the celebration of traditional festivals and the inheritance of customs.

Cultural negotiations of the second generation

The second generation faces more cultural negotiations and seeks a balance between tradition and local culture. They grow up in a bilingual or multilingual environment and seek a balance between family traditions and local culture. There are more educational options, such as Chinese education and national education.

The third generation and beyond: Finding a balance in multiculturalism

The third generation and beyond seek a new balance in multiculturalism and have a new interpretation of traditional culture. Cultural positioning can be carried out from a global perspective.

7. Identity reconstruction and self-definition

The identity reconstruction of Malaysian Chinese is a multi-faceted and dynamic process, reflecting their adaptation and self-positioning in a complex social environment. This process involves three main aspects: Chinese cultural identity, Malaysian national identity and global citizenship. Chinese cultural identity is reflected in the celebration of traditional festivals, the use of Chinese and the adherence to Chinese cultural values. Malaysian national identity is reflected in the sense of belonging to the country, the enthusiasm for participating in national affairs and the interaction with other ethnic groups. Global citizenship is gradually formed with the increase in internationalization and is reflected in international vision and cross-cultural ability.

This multi-faceted identity is expressed differently in different occasions. In daily social interactions, Malaysian Chinese may flexibly switch their identity expressions according to the objects of interaction. For example, in Chinese community activities, they may show more Chinese cultural identity; while in occasions such as national celebrations, they will emphasize their Malaysian national identity.

Language choice plays a vital role in the identity expression of Malaysian Chinese. Multilingual ability is a major feature of Malaysian Chinese and also an important cultural capital for them. Most Malaysian Chinese are fluent in at least two languages, usually a combination of Chinese, English and Malay. This language ability not only facilitates daily communication, but also creates advantages for them in the workplace and on the international stage [5].

However, the protection and inheritance of dialects has become an increasingly serious problem. As time goes by, most of the third generation and later Chinese immigrants no longer speak the dialects of their ancestors. This language gap may have a profound impact on the identity of contemporary and future generations of Malaysian Chinese. Dialects are not only a means of communication, but also carry rich cultural connotations and emotional connections. Losing dialects may mean alienation from certain cultural roots, which in turn affects the overall cultural identity [2].

The impact of cross-cultural marriage on identity

In the context of multiculturalism in Malaysia, cross-cultural marriage is becoming increasingly common, which has a profound impact on the identity of the Chinese. Cross-cultural marriage promotes cultural integration and forms a new family culture. This new family culture is often a mixture of multiple cultures, which not only retains the characteristics of each culture, but also creates a unique family tradition.

Children who grow up in such families often have a more complex and rich multicultural identity. They may identify with multiple cultural backgrounds at the same time, or develop a unique mixed cultural identity. This multi-identity may bring cultural advantages or lead to identity confusion.

The celebration of festivals and the inheritance of traditions in cross-cultural families present an interesting fusion phenomenon. For example, a family composed of Chinese and Malays may celebrate both the Chinese New Year and Eid al-Fitr. This cultural integration not only enriches family life, but also contributes new elements to the multicultural development of the entire society.

The impact of social policies on identity construction

Malaysia's social policies have a profound impact on the identity construction of the Chinese. The implementation of racial quota policies in the fields of education and employment has directly affected the educational opportunities and career development paths of the Chinese. On the one hand, these policies may have strengthened the boundaries of certain ethnic groups, and on the other hand, they have also prompted the Chinese community to seek new development strategies, such as investing more in the private sector or choosing overseas development.

Language policy is also crucial to the shaping of cultural identity. With the changes in the country's language policy, the status and development of Chinese education have also experienced ups and downs. This has not only affected the language ability of the Chinese, but also profoundly affected their cultural identity. Many Chinese families often need to make a trade-off between maintaining cultural traditions and adapting to mainstream society when choosing their children's education.

The implementation of multicultural policies and their effects are another important aspect. The multicultural policies implemented by the Malaysian government in recent years have, to a certain extent, affirmed the value of the cultures of various ethnic groups and provided a certain space for the protection and development of Chinese culture. However, in actual implementation, how to balance the interests of various ethnic groups and truly achieve cultural diversity remains a continuous challenge.

In general, social policies have both restrictive effects and created new opportunities for the construction of the identity of the Chinese in Malaysia. It has prompted the Chinese community to constantly adjust its own positioning and seek a balance between maintaining cultural characteristics and integrating into the mainstream of the country. This process has shaped the unique identity of the Chinese in Malaysia and has also made an important contribution to the country's multicultural development.

8. Social Integration in a Multicultural Context

Interaction and Relationship with Other Ethnic Groups

The interaction between Malaysian Chinese and other ethnic groups is increasingly frequent, and this interaction is reflected in many areas such as daily life, business and the workplace. In daily life, interactions between different ethnic groups have become the norm, such as establishing friendly relations between neighbors and participating in community activities together. However, despite frequent interactions, some invisible barriers still exist. These barriers may arise from cultural differences, language barriers, differences in religious beliefs, and certain prejudices left over from history. For example, in some traditional communities, in-depth interactions between different ethnic groups may still be limited, or there may be gaps in understanding between different ethnic groups on certain sensitive topics [1].

Participation and Contribution in the Public Domain

In recent years, the participation of Malaysian Chinese in the public domain has continued to increase, covering many aspects from the local to the national level. In the political field, more and more Chinese are actively participating in local politics, and their voices are becoming louder, from grassroots community committees to national political parties and parliaments.

This participation is not only reflected in traditional Chinese political parties, but also in the importance that mainstream political parties attach to Chinese representatives. Chinese also play an important role in civil society organizations. Many non-governmental organizations and social groups are founded or led by Chinese, and these organizations have made significant contributions to promoting social progress, safeguarding citizens' rights, and promoting cultural exchanges.

Strategies to face discrimination and prejudice

Despite Malaysia's emphasis on multiculturalism, discrimination and prejudice still exist. First, efforts to educate and raise awareness are the most basic and long-term strategies. Through school education, community lectures, cultural exchange activities, etc., the Chinese community strives to enhance other ethnic groups' understanding of Chinese culture and contributions, while also promoting the Chinese themselves' understanding and respect for other cultures. The promotion of cross-ethnic dialogue and understanding is another important strategy. By organizing cross-ethnic forums, cultural exchange activities, youth exchange camps, etc., direct communication and mutual understanding between different ethnic groups are enhanced. These activities help break down prejudices and build friendships and trust across ethnic groups.

Efforts to build an inclusive social identity

Building a truly inclusive Malaysian society requires sustained efforts from all sides. The promotion of multicultural education is at the core of this effort. Cross-cultural activities at the community level are another important aspect. Many Chinese communities organize "open days" to invite other ethnic groups to visit Chinese temples and participate in traditional festivals. These activities not only showcase the charm of Chinese culture, but also provide a platform for communication between different ethnic groups [6]. The cultivation and emphasis of common values is an important foundation for building an inclusive society. The Chinese community strives to find and emphasize values shared with other ethnic groups, such as family values, respect for the elderly and love for the young, hard work, etc., and enhances the sense of identity and cohesion between ethnic groups by emphasizing these common points. Finally, balancing national identity and ethnic identity is an ongoing challenge and direction of effort.

9. Conclusion

The study reveals the complex dynamics of cultural inheritance, rupture and reconstruction between generations in Malaysian Chinese families. Chinese culture is both inherited and reinterpreted in the Malaysian Chinese community. With the change of generations, the cultural identity, language use and identity construction of Malaysian Chinese have gradually changed, showing a transition from traditional Chinese cultural identity to multicultural identity.

The limitations of the study include the limited sample size and the fact that only five families were involved, which may not fully represent the diversity of the Malaysian Chinese community. In addition, the subjectivity of narrative research methods may also affect the generalizability of research results.

Future research can further expand the sample size and include more Chinese families with different backgrounds to more comprehensively understand the diversity of intergenerational cultural inheritance. At the same time, other factors that affect cultural inheritance, such as social policies and education systems, can be explored, and their impact on the cultural identity and social integration of the Chinese community.

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