



Chinese Malaysian Flavours

*An anthropological study of food and identity formation
in Penang*

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”The discovery of a new dish is
more beneficial to humanity than
the discovery of a new star”
(Brillat-Saverin 1926:xxxiv)

Abstract

This thesis is based on a six months fieldwork on the Chinese community in Penang, a small island-state on the west coast of Malaysia. My intention is to shed light on the connection between Chinese Malaysian food, ethnic identity and national attachment. The scope of this thesis is therefore to demonstrate how my Chinese informants used cooking, ingredients and eating habits in order to maintain and express their ethnic identity – within the Chinese community as well as in relation to their significant “other”, the Malays. I will suggest that food is part of what incorporates the Chinese in a moral community and helps unifying the different sub-divisions from within. Ethnic groups cannot exist in isolation though, but are always defined in opposition to other relevant groups (Barth 1969:14-15). I will therefore also show how food serves to differentiate the Chinese moral community from other moral communities on the island. In particular the single ingredient pork can be seen as an ethnic marker which highlights the different value systems of the Chinese and the Muslim Malays. I will argue that from a Chinese viewpoint these conflicting foodways also reflect the wider social, political and ethnic conditions in the country as well as their ambiguous minority situation. The Malaysian national ideology is based on principles of culture, race, language, religion and territory and the Chinese Malaysians are therefore defined as outsiders. They are Malaysian citizens but lack the defining incorporating features needed to legitimate their national belonging and identity within such a racial and indigenous state (Surydinata 1997:4-6). At the same time they continue to maintain various economical, religious and cultural bonds to China, something which serve to enforce their in-between situation in Malaysia.

Neither foodways nor identities are fixed or static entities though. On the contrary they are social constructions emerging from dynamic processes of borrowing, reinvention and negotiation. A particular Chinese dish with a mix of local and traditional components can in other words reflect both cultural continuity and local transformation (Tan 2001:140). I will argue that the widespread Chinese appropriation of local ingredients and cooking principles can symbolise the construction of a “new” localised Malaysian identity, clearly distinguished from both the Malays and the Chinese in Mainland China. Changing foodways can in other words be utilised by the Chinese in an attempts to incorporate themselves in the nation-state on their own terms

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Two years of my life as a master student in social anthropology is now a thing of the past. The final outcome of these months, weeks, days and hours, spent in the tropical heat of Penang as well as in front of my computer in the reading hall, is the thesis you are holding in your hands at this moment. I realise now that I went into this project a bit blue-eyed. But then again it is impossible to fully understand the amount of work behind such an assignment until you've actually experienced it first hand. More than anything else my time as a master student has taught me a lot about myself, about my strengths and shortcomings. Although it has been a mind-wrecking journey in many ways I will look back on this period as one of the most challenging and satisfying adventures in my life and I am proud of myself for going through with it. One thing is for sure though; it wouldn't have been possible without the people who have backed me up throughout the whole process, both academically, practically and personally.

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Solvor Horrig Helland,

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Table of Contents

Introduction and theoretical framework	I
Important contributions to the study of food in anthropology	3
“50 Years of Nationhood” – The nation-state, Islam and ethnic politics in Malaysia.....	4
Food and collective identity.....	5
Earlier research.....	7
National and transnational identities.....	8
Structure of chapters	10
ONE: East of India and West of China in the kingdom of spices.....	13
History of immigration.....	14
Geography.....	16
Georgetown.....	17
TWO: “Have you eaten yet?”	19
Penang, the “Food Paradise”	19
My first taste of Penang	21
Being a guest.....	25
Sidewalk eating.....	27
Food in mind.....	30
Experience of taste and location	31
Conclusion	33
THREE: Informants and reseach methods.....	35
Informants.....	35
‘Studying up’	38
Language and complexity of the Chinese community	40
Arenas.....	42
Research methods.....	43
Written material	45
Positioning.....	46
Ethical concerns	46
FOUR: The Chinese Moral Community.....	47
To eat within culture.....	47
Morally united.....	48
Filial piety	50

Commensality	53
Food offerings: “To be Chinese is to perform Chinese rituals”	56
Conclusion.....	60
FIVE: Food as a vehicle for ethnic differentiation and boundaries	61
The relevance of NEP and Islam	63
Purity and pollution – the act of eating in Islam.....	64
“The Chinese eat anything on four legs, except chairs”	67
The Islamization of Chinese food	70
”They won’t even eat from our cutlery” – Chinese frustrations in a bowl of noodles.....	71
Lack of knowledge and mutual understanding.....	74
“Everything down here is either fattening or sensitive”	75
Conclusion.....	77
SIX: Between Malaysian nationalism and Chinese transnationalism	79
The dynamic aspect of food.....	79
A constant recreation of food and identity	81
The case of nyonya food.....	81
Nyonya food as a hybrid Chinese cuisine	84
Betwixt and between China and Malaysia.....	86
A nation of “durian-lovers”: Using food to negotiate for a unique national identity	91
Conclusion.....	95
Concluding Remarks	97
Bibliography	101
Appendix.....	113
Abbreviations.....	113
List of dishes.....	114
List of photos.....	115

Introduction and theoretical framework

”After 6 PM half of the people in the streets are preparing food while the other half are eating it.”

This was one of the first comments I heard as I arrived in Georgetown¹ a late night in January 2007. It was dark but the city was lit by innumerable hawker stalls and the sidewalks were bustling with Chinese, Indians and Malays who all seemed to have one thing in common, they were eating.

This thesis is an analysis of the link between foodways and identity formation in Penang, a small island-state on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. More precisely my intention is to shed light on the connection between Chinese Malaysian food, ethnic identity and national attachment. The scope of this thesis is therefore to demonstrate how my Chinese informants used cooking, ingredients and eating-habits in order to maintain and express their ethnic identity – within the Chinese community as well as in relation to their significant “other”, the Malays. Drawing on this I will also show how *changing* foodways are utilised by the Chinese in an attempt to negotiate for a unique localised *Malaysian* identity.

¹ The state capital of Penang. In daily language Georgetown is called Penang, and I will therefore use the two names more or less as synonyms. When talking about other areas on the island I will refer to them specifically.

My Chinese Malaysian friend, Emilie, whom I'd met earlier while studying abroad in Scotland, had already warned me about the Malaysian "food obsession". She herself was no exception and when I told her I was planning to do my fieldwork in Penang her immediate reaction was "*good choice, the food is excellent there!*" Emilie and I had been flatmates in Glasgow from autumn 2005 to the summer of 2006 and she was the one who initially inspired me to choose Malaysia and Penang as the setting for my fieldwork. While we lived together she constantly complained about the political and religious situation in her country and I noticed that she flinched whenever she told people that she was a Malaysian as if she was embarrassed or self-conscious about her own national identity. She used to say that the reason why she, along with thousands of other Malaysian Chinese, went abroad to study was because they weren't offered the same opportunity in their own country. These bitter comments raised my curiosity and when I found out that Malaysia was celebrating its 50th anniversary as an independent nation-state in 2007 I decided that this was my chance to visit Emilie's homeland and get a first hand experience of the reality she had told me so much about.

The questions which formed the basis of my research at this point, were in two parts. First: To find out what strategies the Chinese utilized in order to strengthen and maintain their ethnic identity in surroundings increasingly stamped by a cultural, religious and political Malay hegemony. And secondly: To explore whether this situation possibly could be combined with a feeling of attachment to the Malaysian nation-state. For some reason Emilie's recurrent comments about food kept echoing in my ears though, something which puzzled me as I couldn't see the link to my research questions. One day, however, about a month into my fieldwork, I had a conversation with Kevin, a Chinese businessman in his 30s who was eager to help me with my studies. We were talking about his feelings towards the other ethnic groups on the island, when he suddenly uttered: "*You know, in one way it is the food that brings us together.*" This statement and the following discussion was what made me realise that my exploration of ethnic identity and national attachment had to be studied in relation to something more palpable, and that in the case of Penang one of the concrete expressions of identity had been right before my eyes, in my stomach and on each visible street corner the whole time, namely food.

What did Kevin's comment really mean? How does the exceptional preoccupation with food and eating influence the lives of the Penang people? Can food be linked to the maintenance and expression of Chinese ethnic identity, and is it possible that it also plays a part in the

relationship between the Chinese and the Malays? Finally: can my Chinese informants' food habits, in any way, tell us something about their feelings towards the Malaysian nation-state? These are the questions I will discuss in this thesis and food will therefore be used as a "lens" through which to gaze into the lives of the Chinese Malaysians I got to know.

Important contributions to the study of food in anthropology

Food and nutrition is probably human beings' most powerful and basic need and according to Levi-Strauss (1966:587) it can be considered to be in-between nature and culture. Through cooking we transform the raw "natural" substances into culture and in this sense all prepared food is exclusively cultural, that is, chosen or invented.² There are virtually no limits to what human beings *can* eat, however, in any given society people only choose to eat a selection of all things edible. Food is charged with deep and embodied emotions and as humans we are therefore never neutral towards what we put into our bodies. The limits are in other words laid down by culture, history and society and food is thus different from other types of consumption in that it literally enables us to "consume culture" (Mintz 2001:271,273).

The anthropological study of food is distinguished by the fact that the symbolic side of nutrition is emphasized. The question of greatest importance is therefore what eating, commensality, different dishes and ingredients express in more abstract terms. This anthropological field was initially taken seriously with the rise of structuralism in the 1960's (Caplan 1997:1, 3). Scholars in this period (Barthes 1975; Douglas 1966, 1971; Levi-Strauss 1970) had a tendency to study food as a cultural system or social language which could be understood through the deciphering of symbols and metaphors. However as this approach failed to take the dynamic aspect into account and lacked reference to history it was heavily criticised by anthropologists in the 80's (Goody 1982; Mintz 1985) who argued that social and individual differences, external conditions and power relations also had to be considered. Today most scholars within the discipline are aware of the importance of context and the fact that foodways, like all other cultural expressions, change in space and time. Food is,

² Food is not in abundance in all parts of the world though. The anthropological study of 'food security' should therefore also be mentioned (for example Pottier 1999). Sufficient food supply is nevertheless taken for granted in many societies (which largely is the case in Penang) and the terrifying force of hunger is thus something people in these areas have yet to experience.

however, still seen as charged with meaning and communication value, and seeking to explain symbols and metaphors therefore continues to be highly relevant (Caplan 1997:3).

“50 Years of Nationhood” – The nation-state, Islam and ethnic politics in Malaysia

As mentioned Malaysia celebrated its 50th anniversary as an independent nation-state (*merdeka*) in 2007 and although this thesis principally will focus on identity formation on the micro level, it is impossible to discuss issues related to ethnicity and nationalism without taking the wider political and religious context into account. Neither identity nor food is static entities, and in line with Goody (1982) and Mintz (1985) I will stress the importance of context in the study of Chinese foodways and identity in Penang, especially in relation to power structures. By *power structures* I mean the dominating ideologies of the Malaysian nation-state and the influence these have upon the expression and understanding of ethnic and national identity on the grassroots level. The following section is therefore meant to provide the reader with some basic background information of Malaysia’s national ideology and ethnic politics.

The nation-state is a fairly new concept in Southeast Asia and based on Gellner’s (1983:1) definition of nationalism as a political theory presupposing that ethnic and political boundaries should coincide, none of the states in this region really qualify. Instead they can, in line with Suryadinata (1997), be seen as ex-colonial states with multiethnic populations who are in the process of building a nation within an already drawn state boundary. With the exception of the immigrant state Singapore they can all be characterised as indigenous states, that is; states defined by the cultural heritage of what is thought to be the indigenous group. A further sub-division, given by Suryadinata (1997:4-6), can be drawn between cultural and racial nations. Thailand is an example of the first and in this country a “double identity” is less problematic. Malaysia, on the other hand, belongs to the latter category, something which in practice means that the Chinese inhabitants always will be perceived as Chinese first and Malaysian second.

Malaysia is the Southeast Asian country with the largest Chinese minority population. With independence from British colonial rule in 1957 a “social contract” was made between the three largest ethnic groups. The Chinese and Indian minorities were to acknowledge the

superior position of the Malay majority and in return they would receive Malaysian citizenship. In practice this meant that the Malay language, *bahasa melayu* was to be the national language, the Malay religion, Islam, the state religion and the Malay sultanate the symbolic head of state. The New Economic Policy (from here on NEP) was launched in 1971 and served to enforce this trend as well as the racial and ethnic differentiation in the country. The ultimate aim of this policy was to fight poverty and promote ethnic equality in the economic arena, and the intention was therefore to help the Malays to “catch up” with the economically stronger Chinese. In Malaysia today, 37 years later, NEP’s³ initial aim to combat poverty is, however, rarely mentioned. The policy is primarily a quotation system which gives those who fall into the *Bumiputera* (“sons of the soil”) category (Malays and *orang asli*) special privileges⁴ (Long 2007). This system is built on the construction of the Malays as “rightful heirs” and derives from the fact that they have a common history tied to the geographic area, are of the Malay race and share the religious value system of Islam (Brown 1994:254). Islam was made state religion in Malaysia in 1957 (Andaya & Andaya 2001:285) and has undergone an extensive revitalization since. Today it has become an essential unifying element and identity marker for the Malays who are “born Muslim” and attachment to Islam is therefore one of the most prominent criteria’s for being included in the *Bumiputera* category (Surydinata 1997:4-6, 31).

This is in other words the political and religious setting the Chinese Malaysians find themselves in and as my research questions incorporate topics inextricably linked to my informants’ understanding of NEP, Islam and their minority situation this will serve as an essential backdrop for my further analysis of Chinese foodways and identity formation.

Food and collective identity

In this thesis I wish to draw the reader’s attention to the unique food-scene of Penang and I will argue that the central role food plays in the everyday life of my informants makes it a

³ NEP was replaced by NDP (New Development Policy) 1990(Debernardi 2004:121). But as this policy has the same principal character, and none of my informants seemed to care about the name change, I will continue to refer to NEP

⁴ They are favoured in the labour market, in the education system and are given special business licences from the government. They are also given discounts when buying land and 30% of all businesses registered on the stock market must be on Malay hands (Long 2007)

fruitful point of departure for my study of ethnic identity and national attachment. The famous anecdote: “Tell me what thou eatest and I will tell thee what thou art” (Brillat-Savarin 1826:xxxiii), says something about how vital food is in the expression of identity. Recent anthropologists like Fischler (1988:280) has acknowledged this and sees food as a marker of difference.⁵ Fischler argues that the relationship between human beings and their food combines at least two different dimensions. The first runs, like Levi-Strauss (1966) also pointed out, from nature to culture and thus from the nutritional to the symbolic. The second, on the other hand, takes the connection a step further, and links the individual to the collective. Food can thus be seen as the link between the biological, individual and social man (Fischler 1988:275,277).

Chinese food is at the locus of this thesis, yet in theory any of the ethnic cuisines in Penang *could* serve as a starting point for an analysis of ethnic and national identity on the island. The local culinary variation is way too extensive to be considered in its entirety, but one common denominator is that most of the food discussed is eaten out, that is, on the public arena. Like Finckelstein (1989) points out, nobody knows what we eat at home, but in public restaurants, or in the case of Penang, at street hawkers, everything we eat and the ways we eat it is on constant display. We eat in front of an audience so to speak, and the sites for public eating can therefore be understood as a kind of “frontstage” (Goffman 1959). The public eating-arena is in other words a highly suitable place for identity negotiation, and the fact that eating out was such a common practice in Penang therefore made it possible to observe and collect valuable information on how my informants presented themselves to each other, to opposing groups and to outsiders like me, the novice anthropologist.

Food can signify gender, class and ethnic and national identities. What is relevant in this thesis is however the latter two, and my intention is to show how such *collective identities*⁶ can be symbolized through food and commensality. By collective identity I mean the construction of a *we* as opposed to *them*. It should however be noted that like all social identities, such collective identities are relative and situational and I will therefore also show

⁵ Food can in other words be seen as something that serve to *differentiate*, not only between ethnic groups, but also between genders (see for example Janowski & Kerlougé 2007; Thompson 1988) and social and economical classes (see for example Bourdieu 1984; Goody 1982). The concept of class and hierarchies of taste is however way too complex for me to discuss within the scope of this thesis and I will therefore concentrate on ethnic rather than class relations although I am aware that these sometimes overlap.

⁶ What a person eat can also demarcate individual identity, see for example Lupton 1996.

that the category *we* can change according to context and the persons involved (Eriksen 1993:30).

Fischler states that “man eats within culture” (Fischler 1988:281), that is, any culinary system is attached to a worldview or a certain cosmology. Food therefore not only signifies ‘otherness’ and differentiation between different groups, but also ‘sameness’ within one particular community. In line with this, and building on Fredrik Barth’s (1969) division between *basic value orientations* and *diacritical markers*, I see food as both internal and external markers of ethnic and national identity. I will argue that food plays a central part in the moral value system of the Chinese and therefore helps to integrate their community and construct a group identity from within. According to Barth (1969:14-15) ethnic groups cannot exist in isolation though, and such collective identities are thus always defined in contrast to other moral value systems. In Penang the central contrast is between the Chinese and the Malays, and food and ingredients is one of the most striking markers of this ethnic opposition. The interaction between non-Muslims (Chinese) and Muslims (Malays) in the context of food is a complicated issue and commensality can therefore not be taken for granted. In line with this I will show that the different conceptions of one single ingredient, pork meat, lead to a highly visible source of conflict which serves to reinforce the ethnic boundaries between the two groups.

Earlier research

Earlier anthropological studies of Chinese food have largely focused on explaining the origin of dishes, items, eating practices, symbols, classification, health concerns and taboos related to food (Anderson 1988; Chang 1977; Lai 1984). Lately, however, fast food (Watson 1997) and, especially, national cuisines (Appadurai 1988; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993) has become increasingly popular objects of inquiry in Asia. Such studies reveal processes of cultural change, local tradition and last but not least the formation of ethnic and national identities.

Tan Chee-beng (2001) has written a paper called *Food and ethnicity with reference to the Chinese in Malaysia*, a text which largely coincides with my findings and helps boost my own understanding of food and ethnic divisions in Penang. Tan (2001:126) notes that so far there have been very few studies of Chinese food outside of Mainland China. This is unfortunate as studies taking different versions of Chinese food into account could provide

us with valuable insight into the continuity and transformation of “diasporic” Chinese identities. I believe that new studies of local Chinese foodways, like mine, can shed light on the expression of local Chinese identity, and the ethnic and national dimension of food in such communities is therefore a highly relevant topic of inquiry.

National and transnational identities

Wilk (2006:128) argues that food is a handy tool when considering the effects of globalization. Food connects our physical bodies to the world in a concrete manner and the global reality is thus literally brought to our dinner table. The nation-state is a new invention situated in the global context and in this thesis I will show that Chinese food and ethnic identity in Penang are inextricably tied to the Malaysian nation-state and Chinese transnationalism. Transnationalism is here defined in line with Ong (1999:4) as a “condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space”. In this thesis “space” will however first and foremost refer to nation-states.

The nation-state plays a central role in the distribution of wealth, status and power in a society and the Malaysian nation-state is thus a central force in the lives of the people living within its boundaries. All nation-states are to some extent ethnic in character and I will therefore, in line with Brown (1994:2), understand ethnicity within the state as a reaction to, or a component of the national ideology. The state does, however, not have the ability to execute absolute control, and the opening up of The People’s Republic of China (from here on PRC) and the rapid economic growth in the country have therefore resulted in an increasing suspicious attitude towards the numerous Chinese immigrants throughout the Southeast Asian nation-states. Terms like “overseas Chinese” have again surfaced and give the impression that the Chinese no longer belong in the region (Suryadinata 1997:1). This situation is also something the Chinese in Southeast Asia may take advantage of though, as it provides them with an opportunity to establish contact with their ancestor country (Suryadinata 2004:13). Aiwah Ong (1999:6), whose perspectives will be central, calls this process *flexible citizenship* and argues that the *flexibility* is part of what gives the Chinese Malaysians an ambiguous position within the Malaysian nation-state. Such minority communities located away from their original homeland are commonly described by the term diaspora within academia (Clifford 1997). I will however argue that the Chinese

Malaysian scenario is more about recreating Chinese traditions, identity and cuisine, in a *new* cultural setting, and not so much about a concrete or utopian longing for a distant “homeland”.

Richard Wilk’s (2006) study of Belize, a small Caribbean Island, shows how the population consciously and unconsciously used food to build up a local identity in a similar transnational reality. The multiethnic composition on the island made ethnic differences relevant and Wilk noticed that each ethnic group cooked and ate in distinctive ways. However they were all forced to use the same ingredients, they all lived and cooked under the same set of constraints, and through this and meeting others in the marketplace and kitchens the ethnic boundaries were constantly crossed and the recipes blended (Wilk 2006:125-126). The culinary universe of Penang is in many ways similar to Belize. Ingredients are borrowed across ethnic lines and as a result new dishes and even whole new cuisines are invented. Like Tan (2001) I see the case of *nyonya* food as an illuminating example of such innovative Chinese food. *Nyonya* food is based on a blend of Chinese and Malay ingredients and as I lived with a family who ran one of the best *nyonya* restaurants in Georgetown I eventually got familiar with the cuisine.

Another word for the fusion of different cultural elements is *hybridization* and I will use Ulf Hannerz’s (1987) definition, combined with Robert Young’s (1995) thoughts on the matter to explain what this process is said to entail. Hybridity is not just about mixing different cultural elements though, and I find Chua and Raja’s (2001) article *Hybridization, Ethnicity and Food in Singapore* illuminating when going deeper into the various forms hybridization takes in Penang. They argue that despite the blending of Malay and Chinese cooking principles evident in *nyonya* food and incorporation of local Malaysian ingredients in Chinese hawker dishes, the final outcome still resonates on the register of Chinese cuisine and functions as an ethnic marker for the Chinese only. I will therefore argue that the changing foodways of the Chinese can be seen as something that reflects the continuity of their traditional Chinese identity, yet simultaneously contributes to the construction of a “new” localised identity different from both the PRC-Chinese and the Malays.

Structure of chapters

The first chapter is aimed to place Penang on the map and I will therefore give a brief historically, geographically and demographically contextualization of the island as the specific field setting.

Chapter two is an empirical chapter aiming to set the scene of Penang as a “food paradise” and introduce the reader to the people and the food. The intention is to place myself in the field, describe the public eating scenario, and explain how my focus on cuisine came to be a natural choice when studying identity formation on the island.

The focus in chapter three will be the actual foundation of my thesis, the fieldwork. The chapter is meant to give an account of how it was conducted in practice, my informants, research methods and arenas for data collection.

In chapter four I will deal more exclusively with the Chinese community and explore the role food plays in the construction and maintenance of a common Chinese identity. I will suggest that food and eating practices are one way for the Chinese to define themselves as a unified group from within and thus something that helps set them apart from other ethnic communities on the island. I will argue that a shared cosmology linked to food makes it possible for the highly differentiated Chinese population of Penang to unite around one core of moral values similar to what Barth (1969:14) calls *basic value orientations*.

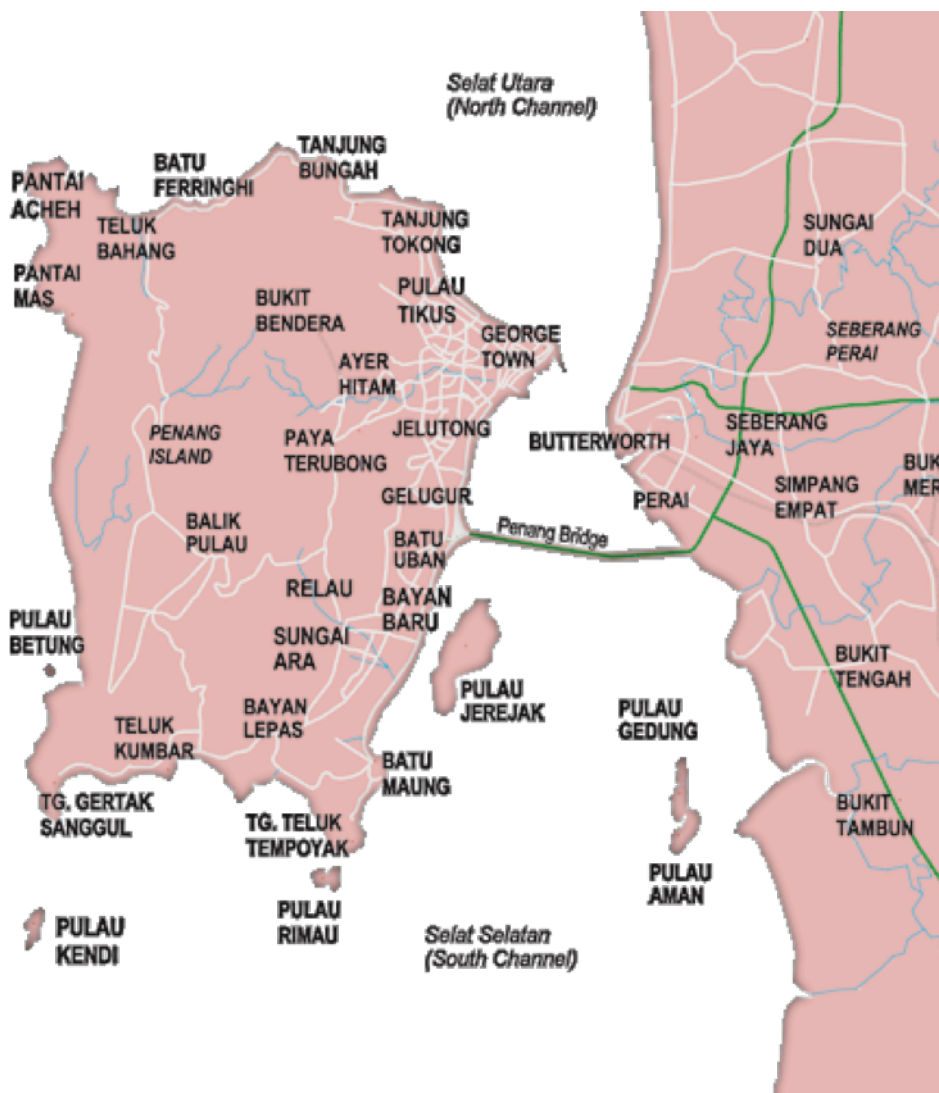
Chapter five will mainly deal with the ethnic relations between the Chinese and the Malays and focus on how certain food items, ingredients and degrees of commensality become striking ethnic markers on the island. I will argue that from a Chinese viewpoint foodways in Penang reflect the social, political and ethnic conditions in the country. In particular pork is an ethnic marker that serves to underline the different value systems of the two communities. I therefore suggest that this particular ingredient can provide a fruitful point of departure when trying to gain an understanding of the ethnic relations on the island.

Finally, food is dynamic and cannot be studied without taking the national, global and transnational context into account. Chinese food in Penang is thus exposed to borrowing and innovation and in chapter six I argue that the Chinese (through food like curry dishes, local fruit and especially *nyonya* food) negotiate for a localised Chinese identity which in turn helps to incorporate them in the Malaysian nation state on their own terms.

This thesis is cumulative in its argument and chapter six is therefore also meant to tie up any loose ends in order to create a coherent picture of my findings. A brief concluding chapter where my main points, and the link between them, will be recapitulated is added to complete the analysis.



Map of Malaysia (2008)



Map of Penang (2008)

ONE: East of India and West of China in the kingdom of spices

My fieldwork was carried out in Georgetown, Penang, from January to July 2007. *Pulau Pinang* or the “island of the betlenut” is an island state situated on the northwest coast of the Malaysian peninsular. It is the second smallest state in Malaysia after Perelis but also the one with highest population density. Of a total state-population of 1,469 million 678000 people live on the island while the rest reside on the mainland costal strip called Butterwort or province Wellesley.

Penang is mainly inhabited by Chinese and Malays, the former constituting 43% and the latter 40,9%. In addition there are approximately 10% Indians, 0,8 others and 5,3% non-citizens (Tourism Penang 2008). In comparison Malaysia’s total ethnic composition is 50% Malay, 23, 7% Chinese, 11% Orang Asli (indigenous groups), 7,1% Indians and 7, 8% others (The World Factbook 2008). The country has a population of approximately 25 million and Penang is the only state with a Chinese majority.¹

¹ Something which makes the situation in Penang unique. Certain reservation should therefore be taken when applying examples from this setting to the rest of the country.

History of immigration

In the 16th century, European maritime nations were racing to gain foothold in the region because of the profitable spice trade. The sultanate of Malacca, situated south of Penang, fell into Portuguese hands in 1511 and was taken over by the Dutch in 1641. In response the British East India Company, fronted by Francis Light, successfully transferred Penang to British colonial rule in 1786 (Purcell 1975:39). The island, perfectly located between the trade nations India and China, was therefore the first part of Malaya to be colonized by the British, and it remained under their rule for more than 100 years (Debernardi 2004:17).

The name Southeast Asia originates from the regions position east of India and south of China and these two massive civilizations have had great impact on the area through trade, religion, immigration and conquest (Howell & Melhus 1996:433).² Centuries before the Western entry into the Malay Archipelago, traders and merchants from the coastal provinces of south China had sailed to what they called *Nanyang*, a term referring to “the Southern ocean” and Chinese records show that trading visits increased during the 14th century (Purcell 1975:16). 500 years later the Chinese labour immigration peaked when millions of poor peasants (mainly from Guangdong, Guanxi and Fujian) left Mainland China to seek a more prosperous future elsewhere (Purcell 1975:1). The Western presence in Southeast Asia and the establishing of colonies resulted in a need for coolie labour and gave the immigrants an opportunity to start a new life overseas.

Francis Light realised early on that the Chinese taste for business and industry could be beneficial to Penang’s economy and as a result the British encouraged Chinese immigrants to settle on the island (Purcell 1975:8, 39). This group was seen as the most profitable part of the population and as the Malays were reluctant to leave their rice-peasant communities the British welcomed the Chinese (and Indian) immigrant workers which were seen as more industrious. This gave rise to persistent ethnic stereotypes labelling the Malays “lazy”, the Indians “submissive” and the Chinese “enterprising” (Brown 1994:216-217). As a result of the labour segregation the Chinese were largely found in urban areas working in tin mining

² The cultural, religious and ethnic variety in Malaysia has made it a popular destination for anthropologists. See for example Carsten (1997); Howell (1984); Karim (1995); Larsen (2002); Nagata (1979), or Rudie (1994).

and commerce, the Indians in rubber plantations and the Malays as farmers in rural territories. The colonial leaders welcomed this segregation as they thought limited interaction would prevent conflicts and result in a more stable society. However following the decolonization and growing urbanisation in the 20th century the rivalry between the different ethnic groups increased and the competition for jobs tightened (Brown 1994:214, 217). Today a majority of the urban Malays are employed by the state and work in public offices (as a result of NEP) while the Chinese dominate the private sector. The Indians are mostly found in jobs with lower status (cleaners, trishawdrivers etc.).

Penang joined Singapore and Malacca in forming *The Straits Settlement* in 1826 (Debernardi 2004:18-19). The Chinese community in these areas consisted mainly of labour immigrants who divided themselves into a number of groups depending on place of origin and dialect. Chinese traders had however settled in Malaya as early as the 15th century and some of them had also married local Malay women. These settlers had adapted certain aspects of the local culture, yet retained their Chinese ancestral traditions and sense of Chinese identity. This gave rise to an additional distinction between the “pure” Chinese and those who belonged to what was known as the *peranakan* culture, a unique mix of Chinese and Malay elements expressed through a distinctive cuisine, language and dress (also known by the names Strait Chinese or baba-nyonya). As the Malays became increasingly Muslim throughout the 19th century, however, intermarriage where the non-Muslim part³ was allowed to keep his or her religious traditions became rarer and today this scenario is close to impossible. The original *peranakan* culture is therefore now mostly confined to museums and history books, but some of the elements live on, for example the extraordinary *nyonya* kitchen (see chapter six).

Indians also form a significant part of the population in Penang and archaeological findings testify that the contact between India and Southeast Asia dates back as far as 200 BCE. A wide selection of Indian cultural elements was localized by the early Malay communities, ranging from Indian cuisine to Indian religion, and first and foremost Islam (Andaya & Andaya 2001:15-16). Today most of the Indians live and work in a part of Georgetown

³ In Malaysia Muslim women can marry non-Muslim men as long as the non-Muslim spouse converts to Islam.

called *Little India*. This area is famous for its outlets selling “authentic” south Indian dishes like *banana leaf rice* as well as *nasi kandar* food.⁴

Geography

Penang is a fairly small turtle shaped island measuring 292 square kilometres and commercially known as the “Pearl of the Orient” (Tourism Penang 2008). This might have been a fitting nickname once but unfortunately it is far from an appropriate description of the modern version of the island. Massive industrialisation and highly polluting sea and land traffic have changed the island quite drastically from the secluded green jewel Francis Light landed on in the 18th century. All original charm has not been drained though, and Penang still has areas of lush forest and white sandy beaches mainly in the Northern and Western regions.

The island is divided in two parts by a chain of hills. The west side is mainly agricultural while the eastside is the urban territory with Georgetown on the Northern tip and the industrialised zone and airport area in the south (Brøgger 1989:36).⁵ Despite being hidden behind dark thunderclouds large parts of the year Penang hill north of Georgetown is the tallest and most famous in the chain. Southeast Asia’s largest Buddhist temple complex, Kek Lok Si, lies visible on the hillside and provides a stunning view of the city if visited on a clear day.

Increasing focus on tourism has lead to the building of a series of new hotels, especially in the beach areas of *Tanjong bunga* and *Batu Ferrenghi*. A number of high-rise apartment blocks have also been built in order to cater to the growing local middle-class population as well as European expatriates. These highly developed areas stand in stark contrast to the Malay fishing villages (*kampungs*) constituted by simple wooden houses mainly located in secluded areas on the south and west coast.

⁴ Steamed rice with various accompanying curry dishes. *Teh tarik* (sweet Indian tea with milk) and *roti canai* (Indian style crispy pancake) are nevertheless the most famous and popular items on the *nasi kandar* menu.

⁵ The free industrial zone in *Bayan Lepas* helped Penang state to become the second-largest economy in Malaysia after Selangor. Key exports include electrical and electronic products, textiles, gold and jewellery. Additional sectors of Penang economy are tourism, finance and other service driven industries. (Pung 2006: 7)

Georgetown

Approaching Penang from the east via Penang Bridge gives a unique view of Georgetown. The island is also linked to the mainland by a ferry boat from the Jetty, but the 13,5 km long Penang Bridge (built in 1985) now serves as the main traffic artery in and out of Georgetown (Tourism Penang 2008). Despite being a city with about 220000 inhabitants one can virtually walk everywhere as it is concentrated in a fairly small area. *Komtar* (Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak), one of the tallest buildings on the island, still serves as a landmark where it rises up between the characteristic rows of colonial buildings. It used to have a thriving shopping mall on the lowest floors, but these days most of the outlets are closed and the shoppers have moved on to Prangin Mall next door, the more fashionable Guerny Plaza in the uptown area *Pulau Tikus*, or the brand new Queensbay Mall in *Bayan Lepas*.



Benedicte Brøgger (1989) notes in her Magister Artium thesis “*Business as usual. Business, Morality and Adaption among the Chinese in Penang, Malaysia*” that *Komtar* and Penang Bridge could be seen as symbols of the modern Penang, and as such, distinctively Chinese. She writes:

“In all their modernness it springs immediately to mind that the two represent the ying and the yang of the Chinese reality, the male and the female, the active and the passive. The tower stands proudly erected in the midst of a teeming city, whereas the bridge with its gently curving lines, passively serves as the portal between the island and the mainland (...) It symbolizes that in the modernization that goes on the underlying Chinese culture still plays a forceful part” (Brøgger 1989:42-43).

The modernization process has escalated since Brøgger’s fieldwork in Penang in 1987 and *Komtar* is now far from the only skyscraper on the Island. The pre-war houses are however under rent control to ensure that the skyline in Georgetown remains low and with its 66 stories *Komtar* is therefore still a distinctive landmark together with one of the longest bridges in Southeast Asia, Penang Bridge.

In contrast to the Indians, who have claimed a distinctive part of town, the Chinese population is found everywhere and largely characterizes Georgetown as a whole. Georgetown is in fact regarded one of the biggest Chinatowns in the world and Chinese clan houses (*kongsis*), temples, shops, flashing signboards, restaurants and cafés are therefore an inevitable part of the bustling city life. The most striking feature of Georgetown is however the Chinese (as well as the Indian and Malay) hawker stalls which cover virtually every free spot on the sidewalks. This hawker tradition can be traced back to the immigration period in the 18th and 19th century when the majority of the migrants were single men unable to cook their own meals. As a result the hawkers started their business in alleys and on street corners, pushing their mobile kitchen trolleys around, a trend that would live on for centuries (De Berre 2006:149). As darkness sets on Georgetown around 7.30 PM the air is filled with the smell of frying pans and aromatic spices. The city comes alive while thousands of hawkers emerge on the streets in order to prepare dinner, supper and late night snacks for its hungry and food loving population.

TWO: “Have you eaten yet?”

Penang, the “Food Paradise”

“(…) the lifestyle of Penang is inherently bound up in its food. Start with food, and you will make a lot of progress towards understanding this wonderful island (visitpenang.com 2008).”

My Chinese Malaysian friend, Emilie (in Kuala Lumpur¹), sent me an e-mail just a week before I was due to arrive in Malaysia in which she happily announced that she had arranged a place for me to stay in Penang. Her father knew a family in Georgetown called the Choo’s whom he had contacted on my behalf, and fortunately they were willing to let me rent one of their vacant rooms upstairs. Emilie, who had visited the family several times, stressed that this would be an excellent choice as the house was “*located in a great area for food*”, a remark that made little sense to me at the time. Later on in my stay, however, I realised that

¹ From here on KL.

Emilie's comment was justified, not only for practical reasons, but also for the final outcome of my field study.²

In 2004 TIME Magazine published an article with the headline "*The best street food in Asia*" (Fitzpatrick 2004) and a paragraph reading as follows:

"Imagine a free-ranging buffet, several hundred square kilometres in area, through which to graze at will. This limitless cornucopia brings together some of the liveliest culinary traditions of Asia, and participation costs only a few dollars. That's the Malaysian state of Penang. Mere mention of its name will set mouths watering—not only among Malaysians, but anyone lucky enough to have encountered its exceptional street food. Got a thing for blistering sambals and sizzling noodles? Then make yourself at home. Generations of Chinese and Indian migrants certainly have—and it's their cuisines, when added to the indigenous style (which itself incorporates elements of Malay and Thai), that have helped make Penang the food-hawker capital of Asia"

Tourist brochures and Internet advertisement also tend to present food as Penang's main attraction. The draw for tourists is said to be the variety, the low cost and the multicultural mix of cuisines. In addition food is promoted as a sensible starting point for tourists and others (for example anthropologists) seeking to learn more about Penang's culture in general. Anyone who has lived for any time on the island knows that it is impossible to forget the visible position food and eating has in the everyday life of the ethnic groups who have settled there. This is first and foremost due to the fact that food venues of all shapes and sizes occupy virtually every vacant spot in the city. And judging from how packed they are, even at 4 AM in the morning, one might start to wonder how much time, effort and thought the preoccupation with food really involves in the lives of these people. This question struck me quite early in my fieldwork and my curiosity only increased when the first local word I learned by my informants was *makan*, which is Malay for food and eating. I was told that as long as I knew this basic word I would be able to get along with people in all strands of society, and to my astonishment this didn't turn out to be as far from the truth as I initially

² The proximity to MacAllister Road's numerous quality hawker stalls made it possible for me to go out on my own at night to have dinner. Georgetown is a fairly safe city, but I was constantly warned not to walk far from the house after dark.

imagined. *Makan* is an extremely central cultural element in the state of Penang and in this chapter I would therefore like to give an account of the public eating scenario on the island in order to provide the reader with a ‘building block’ for the rest of the thesis. On a general level Penang food is a part of the Malaysian cuisine, but it can also be seen as a whole cuisine in itself, separated from the Malaysian category by being “better, cheaper and tastier”. Most Malaysian dishes, whether Chinese, Indian or Malay have their superior “Penang” version and I will argue that, from a Penangite viewpoint, food is part of what makes the island and the people who live there *special*.

I will use my own learning process as a framework in this chapter to provide the reader with a gradual understanding of the topic, similar to the experience of the novice anthropologist in the field. When speaking of Penang food culture it is, however, impossible to deal with one group exclusively, but Chinese cuisine will inevitably be used as a point of departure as most of my informants belonged to this ethnic group.

My first taste of Penang

With at least a million excited butterflies in my stomach I entered Penang International Airport in the end of January 2007. It was already dark outside and only the heat and the silhouettes of coconut trees against the dark blue sky, dimly visible from the airport windows, gave me a vague impression of actually being on a tropical island. My newly assigned supervisor from Universiti Sains Malaysia (from here on USM) was waiting for me by the baggage claim as he had volunteered to pick me up and drive me to the Choo’s house in Georgetown. He was a small Malay man in his 60’s with a white beard that stood in stark contrast to his dark brown skin. Next to him stood a Chinese man in his late 20s who turned out to be his student, Lim. Lim was quite tall for a Chinese and a bit chubby. He seemed to know my supervisor, Dean Faizal, well and they joked and laughed while carrying my luggage to Lim’s white car. Both of them spoke English fluently and as the drive to Georgetown took at least half an hour they had plenty of time to “interrogate” me about my fieldwork. The Chinese situation was something that seemed to bring out strong feelings and they had a series of suggestions, warnings and advices regarding my research.

Arriving in Georgetown we drove around for a while before Lim managed to locate my new home. It was a two stories pre-war brick house situated between two similar connected

houses which both belonged to the Choo family. They rented out the rooms on the second floor in the one on the left, and the wife, Mary, ran a *nyonya* restaurant downstairs. I was however going to live in the house on the right together with the rest of the family. Penang pre-war houses seem quite modest in size judging from the front, which usually is only about five metres wide. They are however several times longer with an entrance hall, living room and in the opposite end, a big kitchen. A steep staircase is often situated in the middle of the building leading up to the second floor which is a bit larger than the first. This is due to the fact that its front sticks out and forms a ceiling over the front door downstairs. My room was in the middle of the second floor and had only one window facing a shaft in the roof.

Tom and Mary Choo was an English-educated couple in their early 60's. They were both retired, but earned a living from Mary's restaurant. Tom was a small skinny man with a face that looked vaguely western due to the fact that he had a large pointed nose instead of the distinctive flat one seen in most Chinese. He was partly bald but used his grey tufts of hair as a comb-over. Mary, on the other hand, must have been a real beauty when she was younger, and to be fair she still was. Asians age slower than western people I've been told and this was evident in Mary who didn't look a day over 40. Tom told me that she'd been in the management board of a big international cosmetic company before retiring, and judging from her appearance it was easy to see that she knew a thing or two about fashion. She had dark brown hair cut in a bob and always wore fancy dresses and tasteful makeup. Tom and Mary had two sons who both were in their mid 20s and busy carving out a career for themselves. They were unmarried and lived in the house in spite of the fact that the oldest had turned 28.³ My landlord and landlady was a lively couple, talkative and accommodating although naturally they needed some time getting use to having a Norwegian girl hanging around in their living room. Mary was however busy in the restaurant during daytime and Tom was therefore the one I interacted most frequently with in the house.

I had expected to be eating with the family, or at least be able to cook my own food in their spacious kitchen. However, as early as the first day I realised that somehow this wasn't the way things worked in Georgetown. As I found out later home cooking is quite rare in Penang. In fact a lot of Penangites don't even know how to cook, according to my

³ It was highly uncommon for unmarried children to live by themselves, regardless of age. This might be linked to the strong focus on family and filial piety among the Chinese (see chapter four).

informants, as all they need is to step out of their front door and walk the short distance to the closest *kopi tiam* (coffee shop) or hawker stall. Penang is the only state in Malaysia where certain hawker centres and restaurants stay open 24 hours, seven days a week, and it is therefore possible to buy food on the island at any time. The prices are low and a full meal may cost less than 4 Malaysian *Ringgit* (approximately 1€). My informants actually argued that it was cheaper to eat out, as buying ingredients in the supermarket for home cooking would cost more and on top of that require more work. In Western sociology eating out has been, and is still largely understood as a modern and cosmopolitan activity used by wealthy groups of people to demarcate their (Western) civility.⁴ However Wu and Chung (2002:9-10) argue that in China, where a majority of the inhabitants dine out at least three times a day, the meaning of eating out becomes less significant and is no longer a differentiator in itself as it involves people of all classes and backgrounds. The ‘public eating scenario’ in Penang is quite similar to the one Wu and Cheung describes and this was also the reason why the Choo’s frequently vanished at mealtimes. In lack of a better explanation I assumed that they ate in Mary’s restaurant next door, but I soon learned that only a fraction of their meals was eaten there. Most days the whole family, Tom, Mary and the two boys, got in the car and drove to a foodcourt or *kopi tiam* close by. Tom told me that they often ate at the same café or stall for weeks until they got tired of the food there and went on to a new one.

Naturally I was unaware of all this on my first morning on the island and was therefore completely taken by surprise when Tom pointed me in a direction and simply said “*if you walk down that road and turn left you’ll find lots of good places to eat breakfast*”.

Bewildered, but obediently, I followed the road down to the junction and turned left into the busy MacAllister Road like he’d told me. What first struck me was the crazy traffic. I had to walk in zigzag between parked motorbikes on the sidewalk while I did my best not to get hit by a car. At the same time I tried to stay clear of the smelly open sewers which run parallel on each side of every road in Georgetown. Eventually I paused to gaze at my surroundings and the sight that met me made my Western stomach jolt. The street was overcrowded with hawkers preparing anything from chicken feet to Malaysian style pizza. Foodcourts with a similar variety and *nasi kandar* restaurants busy serving *roti canai* and *teh tarik* to its hungry morning customers. What *I saw*, however, was a total mess of dead chickens and pigs, vegetables sprawled out and cleaned in plastic tubs on the dirty pavement. Intestines hanging

⁴ See for example Finckelstein (1989)

from hooks and the smell of frying oil mixed with the stench from the sewers. The city was brimful of eateries like these and the menus were endless, but somehow this abundance seemed to be part of my problem. Ironically I was surrounded by food, yet spent hours walking aimlessly around on an empty stomach looking for something to eat. As Bell and Valentine (1997:131) point out, public dining is always governed by some sort of 'restaurant norm' or guideline on how to select from the menu, approach the waiters etc. I was, however, completely unfamiliar with the hawker setting and as I had no idea how to behave, just ordering the food seemed insuperable, let alone eating it.

This helplessness was what characterised the first weeks of my fieldwork and needless to say I was ecstatic when I finally started to meet potential informants who turned out to be just as eager to teach me about their exotic food culture, as I was keen on learning. My first real taste of the local cuisine was during a visit to a foodcourt with Allan, a retired Chinese teacher in his mid-60s. I met him a day in the beginning of February in one of the coffee shops located in the commercial part of town. Allan worked as a waiter in order to earn some extra cash since pensions are more or less non-existent in Malaysia. He was a very talkative and lively man, nearly bold, but with a youthfulness that shone through his eyes each time he gazed at me through his spectacle lenses. He was curious about my fieldwork and invited me to join him for dinner that night so we could have a chat about it. Because, as he said: "*All important conversation should be done in the presence of a good meal.*" Later that night he picked me up together with his former student, Jason, and drove us to a foodcourt on the seaside north of Georgetown. Foodcourts was quite a new phenomenon in Penang and Allan told me that they had emerged as a consequence of government policies encouraging street hawkers to move indoors for hygienic reasons. Not all hawker centres were actually located indoors though, but what characterised them was that hawkers were lined up in stalls around a large area of tables and chairs. All the stalls had big labels, food pictures, menus and pricelists and the benefit was that customers could order from different stalls yet eat everything at the same table. This particular foodcourt was laid out in an area so close to the ocean that we could hear the sound of the waves and feel the clear and refreshing sea breeze. The hawker stalls were lined up on three sides while the one facing the ocean was open. The seats closest to the sea had a stunning view of the distant mainland, but unfortunately they were all taken. Wires with colourful light bulbs, suspiciously similar to Christmas decorations, were stretched from the stalls and tied to post between the tables, serving to light up the place as well as to give it a kind of tacky atmosphere. A sign over the entrance

read “*Non-halal*”⁵ implying that this was a Chinese foodcourt. In fact most foodcourts in Penang were Chinese, Allan explained. The Malays on the other hand, who were largely Muslim, had their own *halal* eateries and to find a mix of Malay and Chinese food was rare because of the Muslim prohibition against pork.⁶ Allan and Jason went out of their way to make me feel comfortable. They took me on a “tour” to show me the variety of the food, explained the ingredients thoroughly and gave me their personal recommendations. As it turned out this was just the beginning of my culinary adventure as virtually everyone I met from that point on (whether Chinese, Malay or Indian) was eager to show me their favourite dishes and in a sense “educate” me in their local food culture.

Being a guest

I was always treated to food, a practice which is relatively uncommon in Norway and therefore made me feel a bit uncomfortable. In the beginning I offered to split the bill as it felt rude and inappropriate not to contribute, but the answer was always the same “*No, you are a guest!*” I asked in disbelief whether they were planning to treat me as a guest for 6 whole months, something which usually was confirmed by a stiff nod and a smile. This generosity applied to all my informants whether they were old or young, male or female, Malay, Indian or Chinese (although it should be noted that most of my meals were shared with Chinese informants). Even Yu Sheng, who where still in high school and almost 10 years younger than me, refused to discuss the matter when we went out to eat. He always settled the bill before I was able to bring out my wallet and just ignored me when I tried to pay him back. Throughout my whole fieldwork I was showered with “gifts” in the form of food and my informants wouldn’t even let me treat them when *I* was the one who set up the meetings. As time went by I found this situation increasingly frustrating and one day I asked Kevin, an informant who frequently treated me to lunch or dinner, whether he could please consider letting me pay the next time. He wouldn’t hear of it though, and I suddenly realised that I’d somehow crossed the line. My straightforwardness seemed to have angered him and he drove me home soon after. The next time we met, however, he explained the reason for

⁵ *Haram* is the Arabic word for all things that *prohibited* in the Koran. The opposite is *halal* meaning permitted, but is usually only applied to food.

⁶ For more on pork and inter-ethnic commensality see chapter four.

this unexpected reaction. In his opinion it was extremely inappropriate of me to offer to pay and he said: “*You must never insist on paying, you are a guest and it is rude. If you insist on paying it means that you didn’t enjoy the company of the one you were eating with!*” Kevin continued to explain that it was considered a privilege to pay when sharing a meal, using business dinners he frequently attended as an example. His business associates (him included) would often argue over who the privilege of settling the bill should be given to. It was an honour to be the one who treated the others. Although he never mentioned the concept of *face*, my guess is that this might have been an underlying reason for this practice. A relevant question is therefore what my informant’s intentions for eating with me really was, what was there to gain for them? Doubtlessly they and I were engaged in quite different projects. We were both trying to make friends, yet at the same time I was collecting data for my thesis and I’m sure their motives weren’t purely unselfish either. If seen in relation to the concept of *face*, one theory is therefore that treating others, and maybe foreigners in particular, was a way for them to be gain respect from others, something which eventually might have helped enhancing their social status. Another theory is that it might have been a type of delayed reciprocity as my informants often argued that I would do the same for them if they were my guests. However in practice this reciprocity could not be activated until they would visit me in Norway, something we all knew was very unlikely to happen

Yunxiang Yan (1996) has written an extensive analysis on Chinese gift exchange in a small village called Xiajia in the Guanxi province, an analysis which provides us with yet another possible interpretation of this phenomenon. Yan writes about what he calls “unilateral” or “one way giving” from subordinates to superiors. In contrast to the theory above his kind of gift relationship will not generate power or superiority on the donor’s side as the already established hierarchical relationship overshadows the relation and excuses the superior of his or her reciprocity obligation (Yan 1996:214). Xiajia anno 1996 and Penang anno 2007 are doubtlessly very different settings in both time and space though. Yet if understanding my data from Penang in line with Yan’s analysis an alternative interpretation is that my defined role as “a guest” may have resulted in a status relationship that required generosity from the locals without expecting anything else than my company in exchange.

Yan also writes about *renqing* (lit. human relationships), a kind of social norm or moral which functioned to regulate people’s behaviour in Xiajia, and Yan illustrate the power of this concept through an incident from his own fieldwork (Yan 1996:132-133). It was a common practice in Xiajia to offer guests cigarettes when they stopped by. Yan lived with a

host family but thought it inappropriate to offer his hosts cigarettes when he invited his own friends or informants over. He therefore bought his own pack so as not to be a financial burden to the landlord. To his surprise the landlord and his wife were deeply offended by this and told him that it was *their* responsibility to offer cigarettes to guests in their home, no matter who the guests were. They were disappointed that he had forgotten the common sense of *renqing*, and Yan finally realised that *sharing* was the principle that underlay the ethics of this concept. To buy his own cigarettes would accordingly be understood as an attempt to distance himself and was therefore interpreted by his hosts as a refusal to letting them share with him (Yan 1996:224).

Although I never heard anyone explicitly talking about *renqing* in Penang my efforts to settle the bill and Kevin's comments on why this was considered rude might also be seen in relation to this story. By insisting to split the bill I distanced myself and gave the impression that I refused to let him share with me at the same time as I disparaged his company and friendship. Gifts create bonds between people and according to Mauss's (1954) analysis these types of items can determine how people relate to things, through things and to each other. In my case this bond was expressed through food and the fact that my informants (regardless of underlying motives) took on the role of givers while I was placed in the receiving end of the relationship (Yan 1996:5).

Sidewalk eating

Being treated to meals gradually became a daily activity and it wasn't long before I spent more time in hawker centres and *kopi tiams* than anywhere else. This was the best place to interact with people and the informal setting resulted in a relaxed atmosphere, which in a sense can be compared to the pub ambiance in European countries.⁷ It was over meals people engaged themselves in the good conversations and it was in this setting the social ties between members of a group of friends or family were reinforced.

The fact that the large majority of people in Penang eat most of their meals out has a huge and visible impact on city life. The sidewalks are constantly blocked with tables, chairs and

⁷ See Wilson 2005



kitchen trolleys, and combined with the crazy traffic the city is quite a challenge to pedestrians. These sidewalk hawkers are usually the cheapest eateries where you can see the food being prepared right in front of you and then eat it next to their steaming pans. The hawkers are always placed as close to the actual street as possible. It is important to catch the eyes of by passers and the deep fried chickens, ducks, and sometimes whole pigs (usually hanging from hooks behind glass covers) are carefully examined by potential customers before they decide whether or not to order or move on to the next stall. Hawkers also run the typical *kopi tiams*, but here the customers are seated inside instead of on the sidewalk. The hawkers, however, still need to be seen and their kitchen trolleys are therefore often placed in the entrances or on the sidewalk outside. *Kopi tiams* are almost as cheap as the street vendors but although they provide a room for the customer's one shouldn't expect much luxury or decorations. To give an idea of the atmosphere in such eateries a meal with Christopher, a Chinese boy in his early twenties (and my colleague at PHM), can serve as an example.

Christopher had picked out a *kopi tiam* called *Tai Tong Restoran* in *Lebuh Cintra* (Cintra street) for our dinner. *Lebuh Cintra* was a narrow lane swarming with hawkers every

evening and I immediately discovered that the venue we were heading for was selling *tim sum* (small steamed dumplings filled with pork or prawns) because of the characteristic trolleys the Chinese ladies in white uniforms were pushing between the tables. Otherwise it was a pretty typical corner café on the ground floor of a two stories colonial building. It was lit up by neon lights which gave a kind of cold and one-dimensional feel to it and the simple furniture consisted of worn down plastic chairs and tables. The acoustics in these kinds of places are always bad and therefore they tend to be quite noisy. It was a busy night and the voices of what looked like about 50 customers combined with the steady hum from the ceiling fans made the venue sound like a big bee swarm. The room had two walls but the two sides facing the street were open except for a brick post supporting the building on the corner. At closing time they rolled down what looked like giant garage doors and locked them with padlocks. The floor and walls were made of small white and green tiles in a pattern but otherwise the premises were bare and lacked anything that reminded of decorations. Still it had a certain charm when you got used to it and the surroundings were nevertheless soon forgotten when tasting the delicious pieces of *tim sum* the kitchen trolleys had to offer.

Mely G.Tan (2002:163) writes in her article *Chinese Dietary Culture in Indonesian Urban Society* that many of her informants regarded hawker food to be tastier than restaurant food and to see rows of expensive cars parked outside of the most popular hawker stalls was therefore not regarded uncommon. These people did not care so much about the surroundings as they saw the food as the highest priority. Tan's description is in other words very similar to the situation in Penang and I will argue that my informants, regardless of background, held the local hawker tradition in high regard despite its humble appearance. In fact some of the most popular hawker stalls in Georgetown didn't even provide the customers with chairs or tables, yet at mealtimes these places were nevertheless crowded with customers from all 'walks of life'. As a rule, taste was the number one priority, while ambiance came as a distant second.

No rule is without exceptions though. My two youngest informants, Yu Sheng and his Malay girlfriend, Aida (both still in high school), expressed a slight dissatisfaction with the lack of aesthetics such *kopi tiams* provided. "*It is not comfortable to sit next to the sewers when eating, especially if one is wearing a nice dress*" Aida said once and explained that this was one of the reasons why she, Yu Sheng, and their teenage friends occasionally preferred to eat at McDonalds and similar venues as these were indoors and had air condition. The fact that

fast food chains like McDonalds, KFC and Pizza Hut grew more popular among the younger generation didn't mean that they weren't still proud of their local cuisine though. When it came to taste, price⁸ and quality both Yu Sheng and Aida agreed that nothing could beat a good hawker meal.

Food in mind

Food and eating is central to social life in Penang and was a topic that would pop up in any conversation, in media, as metaphors in daily language and last but not least it was something that seemed to be on peoples minds on a permanent basis.

Food narratives served as 'icebreakers' and were often the first topic to be brought up when meeting people. In fact it was the first topic on most people's lips in any encounter as "*sudah makan*" (Malay), "*lu chiak pa au boi*" (hokkien) or "*have you eaten yet*" were common greeting phrases used among all the ethnic groups. To ask a person whether he or she "*had taken*" his or her breakfast, lunch, dinner or supper yet (depending on the time of day) was considered polite and as far as I understood the underlying intention was to establish whether the person in question was feeling well (full) or not. It was therefore not necessarily meant as an invitation and didn't require a detailed answer. Just "*Sudah*" or "*yes, thank you,*" would do.

Although this phrase was used constantly and as automatically as some Brits say, "*How are you?*" it nevertheless served as a starting point for numerous breakfast, dinner and lunch invitations in my case.⁹ During these meals food was more often than not the preferred topic of discussion and my informants would often brag about the amount of time they spent every day thinking about and craving certain food. As an example Kevin cheerfully explained that he usually started thinking of and planning the next meal even before having finished the one he was currently having and he proudly promised that if I continued to hang around with him I would be able to satisfy my taste buds with new and exiting food on a regular basis. Food was in a sense a form of communication everyone on Penang could understand, he said, and

⁸ McDonalds hamburgers cost almost three times the price of a hawker meal.

⁹ I probably misunderstood the phrase in the beginning, something which might have led my informants to take me for dinner or lunch although they initially had no intention of doing so. They were however way to polite too point this out to me.

in fact even daily language¹⁰ on the island consisted of a range of metaphors connected to food.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980:3) argue that metaphors are pervasive in all human thought and action and that the way we perceive the world around us is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Metaphors can in other words be an indication of how people shape and structure their reality. To use metaphors means in essence to understand and experience one thing in terms of another and in this case in the terms of food. Anderson (1988:200) notes that such linguistic expressions are a typical Chinese phenomenon. “*Eating vinegar*” is for example used in Hong Kong to denote envy while “*to eat ice cream with the eyes*”, means to look at someone of the opposite sex with desire. In Malaysia, however, using food metaphors was not an exclusive Chinese practice. Expressions like *Bananas* referring to the English-educated Chinese (see chapter one), and *Malaysian rojak* (the name of a special Malaysian fruit salad) referring to the multiethnic population in the country, were commonly heard in Malay and Indian conversations as well as in Chinese. Rojak, which consisted of local fruit, raw chopped squid, ground peanuts and a spicy prawn paste, was said to symbolise the great and unique ethnic variety in the country, and of course Penang had its own version of the popular dish.

Experience of taste and location

When I first arrived in Penang I was like an ignorant child when confronted with the local food culture. But as outlined earlier my informants accepted the role as “teachers” and went out of their way to introduce me to their favourite hawkers hidden away in alleys and other remote areas of town. Sometimes they took me to eat the same dish twice at different street stalls or restaurants and then asked me to compare the two and tell them *which one* I liked best and *why*. They also drove me out of the city to sample the rural food in Malay *kampungs* as well as stopping by huge super-modern shopping complexes for more luxurious restaurant meals. Thanks to all this my food experience slowly expanded and as time passed I noticed that my informants gradually expected me to know more than just what *type* of food I wanted. “*What’s your favourite Penang dish?*” they would ask, but when I

¹⁰ Here referring to English and Malay, the only two languages within the range of my

answered they also demanded to know *which place* I preferred when eating it. As my fieldwork progressed I was caught up in these kind of “interrogations” on a daily basis, but it still took me most of my stay to construct the foundation necessary to be able to give satisfactory answers. The breakthrough, as I see it, came during a lunch with Kevin at a foodcourt famous for selling the best *popiah*¹¹ in town. Since our misunderstanding in the beginning of my stay (pp.26) we had become close friends and Kevin blamed our good chemistry on the fact that I was a “*food lover*”, just like himself. This particular day we were talking about food as usual when I proudly announced that I had bought a book called “*Famous Street Food of Penang*” (Pung 2006). As expected Kevin got very excited and we discussed several famous dishes and the best places to eat them for a while. This was the first time I’ve actually felt that I had some basic knowledge which enabled me to partake in such a conversation. It had taken me months to “eat my way through” (parts of) Penang cuisine and even longer to taste the difference between the *good* and *not so good* versions. To be able to contribute to this discussion was therefore a great satisfaction to me, and Kevin seemed impressed as well. “*You must have been Chinese in your previous life*” he laughed, and I couldn’t help feeling a little proud when he added that this was the first time he had met a foreigner who truly shared the Chinese’s love for food.

All the Penangites I met were tremendously proud of their local cuisine, a cuisine they saw as inextricably linked to the islands hawker tradition and raw ingredients (mainly locally grown spices, herbs and fruit). Everyone had strong opinions on where to find the best version of anything from *char kway teow* to *mutton bryani*¹² and the newspapers were full of food recommendations every day. Because of this some stalls were so popular that one had to wait in line at least half an hour before opening time in order to stand any chance of being served. The recipes of these hawkers were often handed down from generation to generation and were their most precious possession. In fact rumours had it that certain families had built up quite a fortune from simply selling tasteful food on street corners.

To eat at the “right” *kopi tiam*, restaurant or hawker stall was in other words essential, and there were enough good options to choose from. It is however important to notice that the

understanding.

¹¹ A special non-fried springroll

¹² Chinese stir-fried rice noodles with prawns and Indian rice cooked with spices and pieces of mutton.

significance first and foremost lay in the venue's reputation for serving tasty quality food to a reasonable price, and not so much in an economical hierarchy of class and status. What was regarded the most popular places naturally changed over time and varied according to the dish. Discussing and comparing hawkers stalls, *nasi kandar* restaurants etc, was therefore an everyday practice and to be able to engage in this kind of conversations was a highly regarded skill. In my case it revealed the duration of my stay and degree of involvement in the local everyday life. The fact that I had tasted enough dishes to be able to tell the good from the not so good was something that, in Kevin's, and the rest of my informant's eyes, gave me credibility. Advanced eating in Penang was in other words something that not only required skills and knowledge of customs, but also of local ingredients and last but not least; experience of taste and location.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have set the scene of Penang as a 'food paradise', similar to the way it was presented in media, tourist brochures and by my informants. My intention has been to show why food can be singled out as an interesting aspect in this field setting and I have consciously used my own experience and learning process as a gateway to give an account of the public eating scenario on the island. On this basis I argue that food can serve as a sensible and fruitful starting point when trying to understand other cultural or social aspects in this context.

Food is important in the discourse of self and identity and in chapter four I will deal more specifically with the Chinese community in order to show how the Chinese in Penang use food to form what I (in line with Brøgger 1989 and Hallgren 1986) call a *moral community*, that is, a common ethnic identity. Before embarking on this analysis, however, it is necessary to start from the beginning, that is, the fieldwork. The next chapter will therefore focus on the actual foundation for my findings, my informants, research methods and procedures when collecting the data material used.

THREE: Informants and reseach methods

Informants

In the previous chapter I placed myself in the field and introduced the reader to the setting where all the stories in this thesis take place. It is however also necessary to outline the practical procedure for data collection in order to understand what the arguments in this thesis is built on.

In total about twenty-one people have contributed to the data material used in his thesis, yet out of these twenty-one I only got to know twelve. These twelve therefore represents my informants in contrast to the remaining peripheral nine whom I only met and spoke to a couple of times. Not surprisingly the majority of my informants were Chinese by ethnicity as my intention primarily was to explore their situation. As I stuck to the Chinese community quite exclusively, I only got to know a few Malays and my insight into the their point of view is therefore more limited. Out of my twelve informants only three were Malay while the rest were Chinese (four Chinese-educated and five English-educated). Five of these (one Malay three English-educated and one Chinese-educated Chinese) became what I regard to

be my key informants. We interacted with each other on a daily basis and eventually became close friends. Two of my key informants belonged to the parent generation while the other three were in their twenties or early thirties. In total five of my informants were in the age group of 40 to 60, while the remaining seven were between 18 and 34. This age distribution was partly coincidental and partly a conscious choice. The idea was that the parent generation might have experienced the launching of NEP back in 1971 as well as the increasing Islamic influence since independence. The people my age, on the other hand, represented the future and helped me get an idea of how the young Chinese perceived their situation in Malaysia today.

Common to all my informants, regardless of ethnicity, age and gender was however that they all belonged to Georgetown's urban elite. I choose to divide this elite into two groups, 'the Chinese business people' and 'the cultural elite.' These groups were not clearly defined and the members did not necessarily know each other or have emic concepts for their group attachment. This is therefore not an analytical division but a division I've chosen to construct in order to simplify the overwhelming complexity of my informants. The divide will in other words not be made relevant throughout the thesis, yet for the purpose of *this chapter* I believe it is useful to try to describe the people I define as my informants using concepts denoting certain external characteristics.

The 'cultural elite' consisted of people from all the different ethnic groups on the island in addition to a considerable number of European expatriates. My three Malay informants belonged to this group and three of my Chinese. Although the three Malays were brought up in Muslim families they described themselves as modern and secular and are therefore not representative for the Malay population in Penang as a whole.

I came in contact with the cultural elite mainly through what I will call Penang Handicraft Market (from here on PHM) where I worked as a volunteer during my fieldwork. The characteristic features of the 'cultural elite' were that it consisted of highly educated,¹ wealthy intellectuals who regarded themselves (and were regarded by others) as modern and liberal. In contrast to other social groups in Penang, which were usually highly homogenous in terms of ethnicity, the cultural elite was mixed and in my experience they defined themselves in accordance to income, education and political views, rather than ethnic

affiliation. This is not to say that they totally ignored the ethnic aspect, on the contrary the Chinese and Malays within this group frequently discussed topics related to ethnicity openly and it appeared to be legitimate for them to talk about these issues as they largely shared the same political views.² The focus within the group, however, seemed to be more on a common aspiration to promote the cultural scene in Georgetown. My ‘cultural elite’ informants spent large amounts of time, money and effort on cultural initiatives and PHM was one of their main accomplishments. This was supposed to be a monthly showcase of local art and crafts aiming to revitalize traditional ethnic handicrafts, and young and talented local artists were thus encouraged to come and sell anything from herbal remedies to hand made jewellery. PHM was open to anyone, but in practice the customers and audience largely reflected the people behind it. They were mainly wealthy Chinese, Indians and Malays as well as Western tourists.

The remaining six of my Chinese informants belonged to the group I’ve chosen to call ‘Chinese business people’. My landlord and landlady fell into this category, but I largely came in contact with this group through one of my key informants Kevin, a businessman I met more or less randomly during the Indian *Thaipusam* festival in the beginning of my fieldwork. Like the ‘cultural elite’ the ‘Chinese business people’ were highly educated and came from successful business families on the island. A common denominator was however that they were more preoccupied with business strategies and finding ways to increase their wealth than with the promotion of Penang’s cultural scene. Some of them would work day and night in order to earn enough to retire early and maybe afford to set up a home abroad. Kevin, who ran a successful insurance company, is an example of this attitude. He had done well the last couple of years and by the time I met him he was on the outlook for profitable ways to invest his newly earned money. He already owned three brand new apartments in different parts of Penang and was about to buy a fourth one in a fashionable area in Singapore. He also invested in pieces of art and told me that if everything went according to plan he would retire by the time he was 40 and move with his fiancée to San Francisco. The only

¹ Usually in countries like US, UK or Australia

² Interestingly the Chinese in this group complained less about NEP and Islam while the Malays were critical to the political and religious development in the country. Stricter Muslim guidelines were after all something that affected their personal freedom and was therefore, in my experience, looked upon with scepticism

thing that stopped him at the moment was his aging parent's for whom he felt responsible (see chapter four).

As the name suggests the 'Chinese business people' were a pretty homogeneous group in terms of ethnicity. In general they had few non-Chinese friends and were very preoccupied with preserving their Chinese heritage and traditions. They were concerned with the ethnic policies in the country and often expressed their frustration with quotation systems etc. that favoured the Malays. The general opinion was that the the inefficiency of the Malays, who practically took up all public positions in the country due to the affirmative action laid down in NEP, was holding the country back and preventing them (the Chinese) from competing economically on the international arena. They often compared the country to their economical successful neighbour, Singapore, and said that if it hadn't been for the government policies Malaysia could have achieved a similar position. As the situation was now, however, it was agreed that the economical opportunities for the Chinese mainly lay beyond the national border.

'Studying up'

By focusing on the urban elite in Georgetown I have done what Laura Nader (1969) calls 'studying up'. Fagerlid (2005) and Lindisfarne (2000) are examples of such studies which in general have become more common within the anthropological discipline in recent years. Lindisfarne (2000:138) writes that she felt indisposed when faced with the exclusive habits of her upper class informants in Damascus, a feeling I find easy to relate to my own fieldwork. The lifestyle of both the 'cultural elite' and the 'Chinese business people' was definitely more extravagant³ than what I am used to from my student life in Norway. Yet my informants seem to find it only natural that I, a white Western girl, frequented their social arenas. On my part focusing on the urban elite was a conscious move. This was partly for practical reasons like language (see below), and partly because I believed that the frustration related to the political and religious situation in the country would be stronger among well-to-do Chinese who after all had more at stake in terms of economy.

³ In terms of expensive cars, houses and general lifestyle.

All my twelve informants were highly educated (or currently undergoing education) and they had high demands to me as a researcher. Participant observation was often scrutinized as a more or less ridiculous method and it was hard to be taken seriously. The questions; “*so which theories are you planning to use?*” and “*what’s your conclusions?*” started coming after just a couple of months and the fact that I found them very hard to answer naturally added to their suspicion. That this was a demanding situation for me as a novice fieldworker is no secret and I cannot leave out the possibility that it might have influenced me in the process of writing. My informants also kept asking me *why* I, a white Norwegian, wanted to study *them*? Fagerlid (2005), who writes about her experience of ‘studying up’ on second generation British Asians in London, points out that these kinds of questions probably are more a matter of *how* they want to be studied, rather than *why*. Her informants, like some of mine, knew their orientalism and was aware of how postcolonial subjects in their part of the world had been studied earlier. Slightly mocking comments like: “*so you want to write about how we Chinese hate the Malays, eh?*” was therefore maybe a sign of their fear of being presented as stereotypes. One of the most noticeable consequences of my choice to ‘study up’ was in other words that I got trapped in “interrogations” about my fieldwork on a daily basis and constantly had to elaborate on, and defend, my interest in *them* as “study objects”.

Lindisfarne's book *Dancing in Damascus* (2000) is written in a highly unusual anthropological genre, namely fiction. According to Lindisfarne the choice of genre was in fact due to her focus on an urban elite, something which, in her opinion, made it more difficult to treat them as ethnographic subjects (Lindisfarne 2000:124-125). Writing fiction makes her analysis more accessible, but I am still reluctant to buy the argument about her informants. After all they were probably highly capable of reading and comprehending an academic text and I wonder whether they would have consented to participate in her study in the first place if they knew that the outcome would be a fictional storybook. I know that *my* informants expect my product to be academic, something which might be due to the fact that they find this kind of study more prestigious and serious. There is however a big difference between my study in Penang and Lindisfarne's in Damascus. First of all, the two settings are miles apart, both geographically, culturally and politically. Secondly, I am only a master student while Lindisfarne is an internationally renowned anthropologist. It goes without saying that what she writes in general has a much larger impact and that her published texts therefore might influence the lives of her informants in a way that my thesis never will. Her

choice to use the fiction genre in order to conceal the identity of her informants might therefore be justified after all. It is, however, an interesting anthropological situation to be face-to-face with informants who in a sense understand your study in academic terms and at the same time have the data and emic concepts (Fagerlid 2005:156). In my case some of them even came up with suggestions regarding theories and literature (see below), and quite a few are still interested in reading the final thesis.

Language and complexity of the Chinese community

The language situation in Malaysia is quite unique, at least in the case of the Chinese who often speak at least three languages fluently (For example Hokkien, Malay, and English or Hokkien, Malay and Mandarin). As an extreme example, Su Yin, one of my key informants and an anthropology student at USM, was equally fluent in Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, Malay, English and Thai as a result of her family background and varied acquaintances. This linguistic reality is also reflected in the education system. Public schools are usually either English or Malay but in addition there are a number of vernacular schools, the majority being Mandarin or Tamil.

As mentioned Malaysia was a British colony for almost a century and English was therefore regarded the national language until the massive implementation of *bahasa melayu*⁴ (Malay) after independence. It is, however, still widely spoken, especially among the elite groups I frequented.

Soon after my arrival in Penang I nevertheless decided to join a Malay language course at USM in order to at least gain an insight into *one* of the various languages spoken on the island. Unfortunately the local dialect Hokkien, spoken by most of the Penang Chinese, was extremely complicated, and I was therefore forced to choose the simplest option, which was Malay. Besides, I thought it would be a smart move to learn the national language as I assumed it eventually would enable me to communicate with *all* the different groups. The Chinese I met were extremely reluctant to speak Malay though, and I often got puzzled looks

⁴ The name *bahasa melayu* can literally be translated to mean "the language of the Malays" and in recent years the Malay leaders have acknowledged that this is a bit unfortunate since it is meant to apply to the all Malaysians. In conjunction with the *merdeka* celebration they therefore decided to change the name to *Bahasa Malaysia*

when I told them about my *bahasa malaysia*⁵ course. “Whatever for?” they would ask; “Didn’t you say you were here to study the Chinese?” In my experience *bahasa malaysia* is not commonly used among the Chinese in Penang, despite being the national language. My informants would often consistently stick to English when communicating with others, whether they were Malay, Indian or foreign.⁶ My landlord even went as far as saying that he didn’t speak Malay by principle, which is interesting as it suggest that language is still very much an ethnic marker for some Chinese. They learn it at school and most do speak it fluently, but they still strongly prefer Hokkien, Mandarin or English.

The Chinese in Penang are far from a homogeneous group and it is vital to get an idea of the most important division lines in order to understand the complexity of the Chinese community. They were differentiated according to religious affiliation (Buddhism, Taoism or Christianity) as well as region of origin in Mainland China. But what first and foremost divided them were language and the distance between the English-educated and Chinese-educated (i.e. those who had attended English and Mandarin schools). These two groups were easy to spot especially among the younger generation. The Chinese-educated (called *ah beng* or *ah liang* by the English-educated) could write and speak Mandarin, but were less fluent in English. The stereotype *ah beng* dressed in Japanese fashion and had some kind of original “funky” hairstyle. The English-educated, on the other hand, were collectively called *bananas*, a name originating from the notion that they were yellow on the outside, but white and westernized on the inside. They spoke fluent English and used it frequently in daily life in addition to Hokkien. However, very few English-educated could speak Mandarin and even fewer knew how to write it. Generally they dressed more casually, and were said to be more familiar with the Western lifestyle than the typical *ah beng*.

Most *ah benges* used Chinese names exclusively, while the *bananas* had Chinese names only in addition to their English ones. Coming across Malaysian Chinese with names like Lily, Magdalene or Eric was therefore surprisingly common and my English-educated informants will therefore be given English pseudonyms in this thesis.

Language is in other words an important differentiator for the Chinese internally and in daily life they tend to largely stick to their own sub-group. To be unable to speak or write

⁶ I am aware, however, that my presence might have reinforced this tendency.

Mandarin is, according to Brøgger (1989:39), a disadvantage for many English-educated Chinese. In contrast the Chinese-educated are unquestionable members of the global Chinese community and their Mandarin skills enable them to read Chinese newspapers and clan records, something which serves to reinforce and strengthen their Chineseness. This was probably one of the reasons why my English-educated informants often encouraged me to concentrate more on the Chinese-educated community. They were concerned that my focus on them was a mistake and constantly reminded me that they weren't "*truly Chinese*". The Mandarin-educated on the other hand seemed to be a more closed group. The fact that most of them didn't speak English made it challenging to interact with foreigners and I was often surprised to see how uncomfortable they appeared to be when I was around. As a natural consequence most of my informants were English-educated, but I did get to know a few young Chinese-educated boys and girls after a while. They had learned basic English at school and knew it well enough for us to communicate without too much difficulty. I do regret not being able to speak Hokkien, but the limited time at my disposal and the complexity of the language made it impossible. As a consequence I have doubtlessly missed out on things, especially in situations where Hokkien or Mandarin was the preferred language and my presence to little or no extent made people feel obliged to speak English.

Arenas

Before my departure from Norway I got in touch with the international office at USM and after outlining the purpose of my stay they accepted me as a non-graduate student at the sociology and anthropology department. The Dean at the department also agreed to be my supervisor and applied for a student visa on my behalf.⁷ In addition I sent an e-mail to a local historian, Li Leen,⁸ and met up with her in February to present my intentions and ideas. She was of great assistance and helped me get in touch with a group I will call 'Penang Charity Group' (from here on PCG). Le Leen was also a member of an organization working to preserve the cultural heritage on the island and they agreed to let me observe one of their projects aimed at youths from all the different ethnic groups in Penang. The intention was to

⁷ To get a student visa in Malaysia one need to be accepted as a student at one of the state universities and the application have to go through the respective department.

⁸ Recommended to me by Ingrid Rudie.

set up a play with these kids in conjunction with the upcoming *merdeka* celebration. During a 4 months period they were supposed to come up with their own presentation of Malaysia's history from the Japanese occupation until independence in 1957. The idea was to let youths from different ethnic backgrounds work together and learn about their own cultural heritage, as well as that of others, and in addition give them an insight into their common national history. I followed the play from its beginning at the end of February to the premiere in June and although my observations from these sessions didn't turn out to be a significant part of my thesis it was very useful in terms of meeting and getting to know people who eventually became my informants.

PCG was a group of friends who produced and sold local products for charity at PHM every month. PCG consisted of a mix of Chinese and Malays from the 'cultural elite' and I worked with them from February to the end of June planning new business strategies and selling various products at the market. Joining them as a volunteer was an excellent way of observing ethnic interaction, as well as meeting potential informants and friends, since members of all the three major ethnic groups on the island frequented the scene.

I also followed my informants in other contexts. I visited people in their homes and went out for breakfast, lunch and dinner with them. They took me to nightclubs, shopping malls or simply allowed me to follow them to their local temple. One factor was usually present in all these contexts though, namely food. Eating and commensality proved to be extremely central and I can honestly say that I got to know all my informants, whether I met them at the market or in other situations, through food.

As described in the previous chapter I lived with a Chinese family of four throughout my stay in Georgetown. Living in their house for 6 months provided me with a unique insight into an average Chinese family's daily activities and routines as well as an opportunity to observe how they prepared for and celebrated extraordinary occasions like Chinese New Year and Ching Ming (grave sweeping day).

Research methods

My field study is first and foremost based on participant observation and informal interviews or conversations. I had planned to do more structured interviews, but as the fieldwork

progressed it felt more natural to settle for an open approach. In fact I think the most interesting information was revealed when topics were discussed in free-flowing and informal settings. I nevertheless gathered information about people's lives, very much like in a life story interview. The context was less formal though, and the stories were gradually built up over time.

Taking notes in front of my informants was something I avoided if I could, as I was afraid they would feel uncomfortable and act less natural. I did however always carry a notebook in my handbag and tried to jot down as much as possible when my informants were out of sight. Most evenings were spent in front of the computer trying to convert my mental notes and cues into written material. I paid special attention to how people talked about each other as stereotypes tend to say something about how people perceive actual relations. I was however aware of the risk of ending up with oral material only. Oral statements cannot be seen as true descriptions of reality as they are a part of the actor's impression management control and are always bound to context (Thagaard 2003:111). A well-known guideline within anthropology is therefore that speech and actions do not necessarily converge and that oral-and interaction data always should be complementary in the analysis. Fortunately I had the *merdeka* play and PHM as arenas where I could observe how people interacted, both within their own group and across the ethnical spectrum. In the *merdeka* play I was usually stationed on the sideline though. As I wasn't a part of the scenes it was hard to find situations where it felt natural to participate with the young actors. My role was that of an observer and I could therefore, more or less undisturbed, absorb and write down what I saw happen in front of me as well as speak to parents and friends who, like me, were on the sideline. The market, on the other hand, was more dynamic. Here I got to participate as I worked in one of the stalls together with local people from different ethnic groups. At the same time I met customers and got to know people from other stalls.

Doing fieldwork in an urban setting, like I did, might be a challenge. The centre of Georgetown is not large in terms of area but it can nevertheless be characterised as a highly complex society quite different from the small communities anthropologists originally were known to study. Frøystad (2003:45-46) writes that fieldwork in urban settings calls for a more conscious delimiting of the field universe, something I've tried to do by concentrating on the urban Chinese elite I met and interacted with in the arenas described above. I therefore base my delimiting more on the topic of study than on networks or geography, but my informants are probably still more homogeneous than they would have been had I done a

study in a small village. Frøystad (2003:47) also points out that what is described as a shift in the methodical focus from interaction to verbal data (Howell 2001; Smedal 2001) might be due to the fact that studies in complex societies (and not necessarily just fieldworks done in “our own backyard”) have become more popular within the discipline as of lately. This verbal focus might also be a weakness in my fieldwork as it was difficult to observe my informants in all situations and participation was sometimes only possible to a limited extent. I had no access to people’s workplaces for example and therefore have virtually no first hand data of ethnic interaction on that arena. The fact remains that I had to rely a great deal on what I was told although I did try to participate and observe as much as I possibly could on the arenas I had access to, and I also made an effort not to take my informants verbal statement as objective truths.

Anthropologists in cities will never gain a total overview of all the inhabitants in the field setting and a holistic perspective is therefore harder to achieve (Frøystad 2003:45). At the end of the day this thesis can only be an account of *my informants’* perception of their reality and the way they chose to convey that perception to me. The risk of over-generalising is therefore something both the author and the reader should bear in mind.

Written material

To gain an insight into the political discourse on the state level I tried to keep myself updated on the media coverage. Malaysia has two major English newspapers, The Star and The New Strait Times, and I read through both of them every day in order to collect relevant articles. *Merdeka* 2007 led to a recurrent discussion on national unity and ethnic diversity, and the cases referred to in the papers therefore often served as starting points for conversations about the Chinese minority situation. These also brought out attitudes and frustrations I believe otherwise might have been kept in the dark.

In addition to the newspapers I also ended up reading a great deal of the local literature written on topics like NEP and Malaysia’s ethnic dilemmas. This was due to the fact that my informants were eager to provide me with written material and constantly gave me books or articles they thought could be beneficial for my studies.

Positioning

As an anthropology student and person I entered the field with a certain history, gender, age, race and language. *Who* you are in other words influences the kind of data you get as well as the relationship with your informants. Unni Wikan (1996:188) writes that she found it hard to be taken seriously as a woman when she did her fieldwork in Cairo. Although Georgetown and Cairo have few things in common, apart from being cities in Muslim countries, this is also something that turned out to be a prevalent problem throughout my field experience. I lived in an area of town with few tourist or *mat-saleh*'s (Caucasian people) and a solitary Western girl strolling down their streets on a daily basis was therefore far from a common sight. I had of course considered the possibility of this kind of unwanted attention in advance, but I had failed to foresee the actual impact it would have on my studies. Being stared at and harassed in public (mostly by men of Indian or Malay origin) was however something I just had to accept as a part of daily life and as time progressed I learned to ignore it. Although Chinese men rarely bothered me in the same manner I realise that my gender and origin also played a part regarding these informants. In fact I found it quite hard to get in touch with girls at first and I'm fully aware that some of the Chinese guys who volunteered to "help me with my project" probably had mixed motives for doing so. However after getting in touch with a sociology professor at USM in late February, I got introduced to some of his students and this was of big help in terms of getting to know Chinese girls my own age. In total I had five female and seven male informants.

Ethical concerns

All my informants, and some of the more peripheral contributors, were informed (both orally and in writing) of the intention of my study. But although they gave me their consent I cannot be absolutely sure that they fully understood what it meant to be my "study objects". This is an ethical dilemma most anthropologists encounter, but it is nevertheless something that shouldn't be taken lightly. It would be fairly easy to recognize some of my informants as they were well known in the relatively small island-state and I will therefore take extra precautions to secure their anonymity by changing names and in some cases the context. As a consequence no authentic personal names are used in this thesis and I've also changed the name of some of the settings and organisations I frequented.

FOUR: The Chinese Moral Community

To eat within culture

“For the Chinese, perhaps more than for any other group, food is a central feature of ethnicity, a basic statement about what one is” (Anderson 1988:211).

Chinese food feeds one-fourth of humanity and according to Lai (1984:v) no people, except maybe the French, is as preoccupied with and takes as much pleasure in eating as the Chinese. Consequently food plays an immensely central part in Chinese culture. In line with this Chang (1977:16) argues that food is at the centre of, or at least accompanies, social interaction among the Chinese and that they use food to express what the tongue cannot convey. He sees food as a social language and writes about *food semantics* as something that offers a potentially fruitful area of inquiry into the Chinese social system. According to Chang the Chinese use food as an instrument for communication in all areas of life. No business deal can be concluded, no family visit completed and no ancestor ritual conducted without the sharing of a meal (Chang 1977:376, Anderson 1988:199).

In this chapter I will present the Chinese in Penang as a moral community and outline the important role food plays for the construction and maintenance of a common Chinese identity. This identity is seen as superior to the various sub-group identities and I will argue that a range of shared cosmological features makes it possible for the highly differentiated Chinese population of Penang to unite around one core of morality. Barth (1969:14) claims that the contents of an ethnic group are of two types, the *diacritical markers*, or what can be called external markers of identity (language, dress etc), and *basic value orientations*, or the moral and social norms *within* the group. In this chapter I will focus on the latter and show how the Chinese system of morality manifests itself through a common understanding of family unity, collective responsibility, commensality and rituals, all linked to food in one way or another.

Morally united

Chinese food in Penang is as varied as the Chinese identities, which are differentiated along lines of education, religious affiliation and last, but not least, place of origin in Mainland China. I believe these were some of the aspects, Jess, a 17 year old Chinese schoolgirl, was referring to when she replied “*You mean our ethnic identities, right?*” after hearing about my fieldwork plans. According to her there was no such thing as *one Chinese ethnic identity*; on the contrary they were divided into a number of separate groups which had little or nothing in common.

Most Chinese in Penang can trace their origin back to a certain place in China and each of the Chinese regions has its own cuisine. Tan (2001:128) mentions five main regional cuisines, while Anderson (1988:159) deems it more appropriate to distinguish between the Northern, Southern, Western and Eastern traditions. The Chinese community in Penang mainly consist of groups originating from the Southern tradition (Fujian in particular) and it might therefore make more sense to distinguish between the types of food associated with the different dialect groups present, mainly hokkien, hainan and hakka. Despite this differentiation, visible both in the cuisine and other cultural expressions, it can however be argued that the Chinese in Penang still share a set of moral values linked to a common core of Chinese cosmology. There are different levels of cosmology though, and it should be pointed out that what I’m talking about here is a set of *common cosmological features*, or

ideologies, not necessarily a shared cosmology as a whole. Based on this assumption and in line with Hallgren (1986) I will call the Penang Chinese “*morally united*” in that they cast themselves as one moral community despite their sub-divisions. ‘Community’ is a term often used when talking about belonging and exclusion, but it can mean a range of different things depending on context and is therefore hard to define. If seen in its widest sense, the “global” Chinese community is not space-bound, but is defined in terms of ethnic affiliation and cultural belonging (Bell & Valentine 1997:93-94). However, Brøgger (1989:71), like I, writes about the Chinese moral community *in the particular context of Penang*. Her loose definition of a community as a “group of people living in the same geographical area” therefore help delimit what is meant by this term in my analysis as well. Morals’ or morality are even more complicated terms though. In fact Howell (1997:2) argues that there are few, if any, useful definitions of these concepts seen from an anthropological perspective as they might mean different things to different people.¹ She suggests to use the term in the plural as *moralities* is more inclusive and thus comprise both ideology and practice. The challenge for anthropologists when studying moralities is to account for the relation between the cosmological discourse and actual behaviour and I am aware of the pitfalls of writing about the Chinese community as if it was an absolute coherent group. I do however believe that there exist some sort of Chinese *ideal or discourse* of morality on a more superior level and that attachment to this cosmological ideal is a way for the Chinese in Penang to communicate group identity, in spite of the fact not all members necessarily adhere to the moral guidelines in practice. ‘Morality’ in this context will therefore mean (also leaning on Brøgger’s definition), a shared set of *ideas* of good and bad, life and death, and the purpose of human existence. In this sense ‘moral standards’ is a part of what constitutes a cosmology, and when learned, serves to create order in a society as well as to differentiate *us* from *them* (Døving 2002:307).

Food is charged with a thick layer of morality and Døving (2003:101-102) uses the Norwegian *matpakke* as an example of a moral identity marker for Norwegians. The fact that they bring food from home to eat at lunchtime instead of going out to expensive restaurants (like the Swedes for example) implies something about the Norwegian peoples conception of themselves. The ideal is to be healthy, ascetic and economical and this moral foundation is in

¹ Pointing to the old debate of moral relativism and psychic unity which I do not intend to revive here.

turn what is believed to be the underlying reason for the Norwegian peoples economical success, as opposed to its neighbouring countries. As I will show below the Chinese in Penang also have ideals which clearly distinguish *their* moral community from other comparable communities on the island. In accordance with Døving's example I will also demonstrate how food is used by the Chinese as a way to communicate these ideals, both within the group and when confronted with other moral communities, like the Muslim Malays.

Filial piety

In a sense the Chinese community can be seen as unified around one moral core of family solidarity. Goncalo Santos (2008) has called the Chinese family the "stove-family," a name implying the importance of food in maintaining intimate kinship ties. I will deal with this relationship shortly, but first I find it is necessary to take a quick look at the moral aspect *filial piety* which is an essential element in the Chinese understanding of the family unit. To respect and take care of the elder generation is one of the most important aspects of the moral order and it is said that only after the duties toward ones parents are fulfilled other pressing matters can be dealt with.

During my stay in Penang I heard many stories about this moral duty and how it had influenced the lives of my informants. Kevin was one example. His father ran a business and Kevin was chosen out of his three children to be the one to take over when he retired. According to Kevin all Chinese businessmen monitor their children closely from a young age in order to decide which one has the best business skills. Kevin had an excellent nose for economy and was therefore sent to San Francisco to study management and economics at the company's expense. Kevin, however, felt that his education was more of an investment in the company than in his future. All along his father took for granted that Kevin would come back and work for them. After three years at the university Kevin received a letter saying that the company was in big financial trouble and that it was time for him to come back home to fulfil his duty to the family. According to Kevin this happened at a very crucial point in his career. He had finished his bachelor with outstanding results and was offered a lucrative job which would have given him an economical future he could only dream of in Malaysia. His father wouldn't hear of it, though, and Kevin realised that he had no other

choice than to go back to Penang and save the company and his parents from financial ruin. Since then he had become the main breadwinner of the family and his parents relied completely on his income.

Another example is the story of Tom and Mary's youngest son who were put in an orphanage. This was due to the fact that Tom's fragile mother still lived in the house and needed their care and attention. Tom told me that Mary cried for weeks when the decision was made, but in his opinion they had no other choice. There was no way they would be able to work full time and take care of both her and a newborn baby. Luckily their son was able to move home when he was old enough to be looked after by his grandmother.

As the stories above indicate the ideal is to put the parent generation ahead of all other responsibilities, even ones own children. Tom once asked me "*What would you do if your mother and your wife fell into the water and both of them stood the risk of drowning? Who would you rescue first?*" The correct answer was to rescue the mother because one could easily get another wife while mothers were harder to come by. *Filial piety* was thus a highly valued ideal within the Chinese community, something which, according to my informants, was a result of Confucius' teachings. Confucianism was not regarded a religion but a moral code for behaviour in the material world and was thus something one could adhere to regardless of religious affiliation. As Benedicte Brøgger (1989:72) points out it is hard to distinguish between moral and religion in the Chinese cosmological universe because the two are so closely linked together. Morals are an attitude to life on earth, but it often finds it's rational in a belief system. Although the Chinese family structure is said to be based on Confucian thoughts it is difficult to tell for sure what came first, Confucianism or the Chinese family patterns. Confucianism is a constructed ideological discourse which serves to define Chineseness according to a singular cultural formation rooted in Mainland China. It therefore has a tendency to be used as an explanation for already existing cultural patterns rather than necessarily being what actually caused them in the first place (Ong 1997:179). According to Ong (1997:192) the majority of overseas Chinese have never read Confucius and their beliefs and practices are therefore most likely based on a mix of Chinese and local elements, rather than on the Confucian teachings alone. It is however interesting that my informants viewed Confucianism as the ultimate reason for their actions as it might indicate that they had adapted this discourse as the explanatory foundation for themselves as well as for outsiders like me. One particular event that brought out the meaning of this ideology quite clearly was the Virginia Tech episode where a student of South Korean origin shot and

killed 32 students and staff members at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, April 16th 2007. In the aftermath of the shocking incident the South Korean nation offered the victims and their families an official apology on behalf of the nation as a whole. This was according to my informants a consequence of the Confucian mindset which also prevail in Korea. If one person did something morally wrong this would not only affect the individual and his or her closest relatives, but the community as well, and in this case even the nation. Evelyn, a Chinese lady in her mid-thirties, explained that in her opinion it was all about a collective understanding of honour and shame, where one person's actions could cause "loss of face" to a whole community. Another example, even more illuminating and relevant in the setting of Penang, was the case of the Ying Ying murder, which took place during the last phase of my fieldwork. Ying Ying was a 3-year-old Chinese girl who was reported missing by her mother after allegedly disappearing at a car park in Penang. Three days later, however, Ying Ying was found dead and it turned out that the missing report was false and that the mother's boyfriend was behind the murder. Needless to say this was a great shock to the population of Penang and the Chinese in particular. Kevin said that the case was "*a disgrace to the Chinese community*" and that it was a big shame for them all that the mother had attempted to cover for her morally depraved boyfriend. He was pretty exasperated when discussing the matter and added that this was usually something that occurred within the Malay community. Malay women who got pregnant outside of marriage often tried to get rid of the newborn baby by dumping it somewhere, but, as he emphasised once more, such stories was rarely heard among the Chinese. If seen in relation to the Virginia tech episode this suggest that the whole community was affected by one man's act, something which might be due to the same Confucian code of morality. Kevin also contrasted the moral behaviour of the Chinese with the Malays, suggesting that he did not expect the two communities to act according to the same moral standard. Referring to Confucianism as a basis for their moral ideal of family unity and collective responsibility,² is in other words a way for the Chinese in Penang to distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups as well as opposing Western value systems.

² As mentioned earlier ideal and practice does not always coincide though, and I was also told stories about people who neglected their *filial duty* and collective responsibility.

Commensality

Sharing food is an intimate action in the moral domain of the family (Døving 2003:111). As seen in chapter two most meals in the context of Penang were eaten outside the home and *kopi tiams* and hawker centres were therefore filled up with dining families several times every day. A family in this setting could mean anything from a married couple to large family groups where children grandparents, uncles and aunts as well as nephews and nieces were present. To talk about a ‘nuclear family’ in the Chinese context is a bit problematic as most married couples with children shared a house with extended family members like grandparents and parents (especially on the husbands side) and sometimes even siblings and their families. It might therefore be more meaningful to define a family as a group of related people living under the same roof, and my guess is that this was the unit most frequently seen sharing meals in public.³ Parts of the intimacy usually taking place within the four walls of a house, or ‘backstage’ as Goffman (1959) would have put it, was in other words moved out in the open for everyone to see in Penang. As a consequence the Chinese were able to display or perform their family unity in public on a daily basis and to catch sight of someone from the community eating in solitude was therefore highly unusual.

The most important meal of the year was the reunion dinner in conjunction with the celebration of the new lunar year, and for a change this dinner was normally prepared at home. The lunar calendar provides the Chinese in Penang with a cosmological framework and according to Debernardi (2004:133) the events marked in the lunar cycle serve to uphold a sense of cultural continuity with China through the performance of rituals. Chinese New Year is the one time a year when all family members should to be gathered and not only those who live under the same roof. The house is cleaned thoroughly on the morning of New Year’s Eve (which during my stay fell on a Saturday) and the rest of the day is spent preparing the reunion dinner. To clean the house properly before Chinese New Year is highly important. It is forbidden to even touch a broom for the couple of days after 12pm on New Years Eve, “*if we do we will sweep out all the good spirits and omens, all our good luck*” Mary explained.

³ This does not mean that all the family members were present at all times. Sometimes people worked night shifts and poor families were probably rarely able to gather the whole family at mealtimes.

I was invited to spend the reunion dinner with Lim (the Chinese student I met on the airport), and his family. Lim had an ongoing conflict with his parents and therefore preferred to celebrate the New Year with his aunt and uncle's family about an hour's drive from Georgetown. Their house was slightly smaller than Tom and Mary's, but had the exact same shape. Unlike the connected rows of pre-war buildings in Georgetown this house was, however, raised on its own in an open field next to the busy highway. The living room had a number of red New Year banners hanging on the walls and special food offerings and oranges and pineapples for prosperity were placed on the family altar in the corner.⁴ Lim's aunt was busy preparing the food and I could smell lemongrass and garlic from the kitchen in the opposite end of the house. Several dishes were placed on the table already, covered so as not to be eaten by flies, but when we entered the covers were taken off immediately and we were told to sit down and eat. I was surprised by this informality and wondered whether it was inappropriate or not to accept the invitation as nobody else had arrived yet. Lim's uncle was out picking up his daughter and her family and Lim and I were the only ones present. Lim and his aunt didn't seem to mind though and before I could protest I had a large plate of rice in front of me. The dishes on the table consisted of boiled chicken, pickled vegetables, *lohr bak* (Chinese sausage made of pork) and grated cabbage which was supposed to be eaten in lettuce leaves. Lim explained that this was considered the same as *popiah* and was a compulsory part of any reunion dinner together with the pickled vegetables, the *lohr bak* and the pig stomach, still boiling on the stove. The stomach meat looked like ordinary pork boiled in a meat juice together with chicken feet. Lim, however, proudly told me that this was one of their most famous delicacies. The stomach was bought with content and it therefore took several hours of hard work to clean it properly before preparing it for dinner. This process was what made the dish so highly valued, he said, while scooping some large chunks over on my plate urging me to give it a try. Finally the missing family members emerged in the doorway just in time to see Lim's aunt place the last dish on the table, fried pig trotters in dark gravy.

One thing that struck me about this dinner was its unexpected informality. Everyone seemed to be wearing their usual clothes. Lim's cousin walked around in shorts and a worn out T-shirt while her husband was wearing a blue shirt and grey pants. They all grabbed a chair and sat down to eat without much fuss and the food was consumed with an impressive speed.

⁴ Dedicated to *Guanyin*, the Goddess of Mercy

Everyone used their own cutlery (which for the occasion was fork and spoon instead of chopsticks as the food was predominantly of *nyonya* origin⁵) to help themselves to the different dishes provided. The meat juice from the pig stomach was particularly popular and to my astonishment everyone appeared to be comfortable using their own spoons to scoop it up directly from the pan instead of using separate bowls. This created a whole lot of slurping and smacking noises, something that nobody (except me) seemed to find inappropriate. When everyone was full they left the table one by one and Lim drove his uncle to a shop nearby to buy some beer.

The lack of formality and effort to dress up might be comparable to the same lack of decorations in *kopi tiams* on the island (see chapter two). In the words of Mely G. Tan (2002:163): “*Western gourmets tend to require an elegant ambience as a part of the meal. The Chinese are concerned with the food*”, a comment indicating that the Chinese preoccupation with food is of another character than the Western. In Norway for example, much effort is put into the presentation of each dish and the atmosphere it is served in as this is regarded “half of the meal”. For special occasions tables are set with the best china and carefully made decorations in order to underline the significance of the meal. To dress up is a more or less a taken-for-granted requirement as it is regarded disrespectful not to put in an extra effort when presented with festive food. This attitude is also evident in restaurant reviews where the “right” furnishing, decorations and light setting are required in order to achieve top score. Aesthetic is in other words an integral part of the Western eating experience while the Chinese, on the other hand, seem to focus more exclusively on one thing in particular, namely the taste, texture and components of the actual food. However as Lim’s family was only one of millions of Chinese families gathered for the annual reunion dinner in Malaysia, drawing conclusions from this particular incident may seem a bit far-fetched. As a contrast I had witnessed Tom and Mary’s departure for *their* reunion dinner earlier that day and in fact they were all dressed up in their best clothes and Tom had even been to the hairdresser to dye his grey hair.

All reunion dinners are in other words different, yet I still think that certain general elements, like the compulsory food items, the fact that it was prepared at home and the manner of sharing; can be derived out of this specific example. The food was consumed in the kitchen

⁵ See chapter six

and the act of sharing was more central than in any other meals I've ever eaten. Everyone had their own plate, but this seemed more symbolic than practical as most of the food was eaten directly out of the pans anyway. Western cuisine is largely based on individual portions and Chinese food departs from this structure. A Chinese meal consists of a variety of different dishes meant to be shared by everyone at the table, and compared to the Western cuisine Chinese food is therefore remarkably stamped by commensality and should never be eaten in solitude. Commensality is a highly important social institution for humans in any society and has been of significant interest to anthropologists as it is something that unites those who partake in it, while it alienates those who are excluded or refuse to participate (see chapter five). The act of sharing food can therefore be seen as the number one facilitator of social relations between persons and groups. When eating together the people present around the table engage in an exchange of emotions, history and knowledge embedded in the material culture (Seremetakis 1994:37). Through this process they become a *we*, as opposed to *them*, and the shared food can therefore be seen as a metaphor of the family in particular or, if drawn further, the Chinese community as a whole (Ohnuki-Tierny 1993:9).

Food offerings: "To be Chinese is to perform Chinese rituals"

Food plays an important role in social exchange and Yan (1996:64) notes that food of various kinds was among the most common gifts in the Chinese village he studied. As an example it was compulsory to bring food items like chicken, eggs and brown sugar when participating in a childbirth celebration, and during funerals food offerings constituted the most essential gift to the deceased (Yan 1996:53,59). Food offerings in general play an important part in the Chinese ritual cycle in Penang as well. The Chinese make continual food offerings to the deities and especially to the popular *Guanyin*, which can be found in most homes as a porcelain statue on the family altar. *Guanyin* is believed to give special protection to the hokkien Chinese and is worshipped in a series of temples around the island (Debernardi 2004:140).

The most spectacular food offerings are probably made during Hokkien New Year,⁶ on the ninth eve of the first lunar month. This is the birthday of the Lord of Heaven, or Jade Emperor (*Tiangong*) and the Hokkien Chinese set up alters (outside their private homes or in temples etc.) filled with plates of fruit, whole roasted pigs and chickens, sweet cakes and cups filled with Chinese tea (Debernardi 2004:143-145). During the celebration in 2007 I was brought to the Clan Jetty by Kevin as this was supposed to be one of the liveliest areas for the occasion. While driving there Kevin informed me that it was a common practice to compete with neighbours when it came to the size and the amount of food presented on the alter. However, when we arrived it turned out that the Jetty inhabitants had abounded this tradition and instead collaborated in making *one* huge offering which was supposed to represent them all. The food was placed on a long table and I counted as many as 16 whole roasted pigs and at least 25 chickens in an addition to an overwhelming number of fruit baskets and cakes.

Food offerings are also essential in Chinese ancestor worship. The moral duty of *filial piety* is extended to the dead and it is therefore highly important to honour the ancestors and make sure that they have everything they need on the other side. For the Chinese the wellbeing of the dead has an influence on the wellbeing of the living and in cases where the dead are neglected it is believed that the living descendants will feel the consequences. This is also common practice in Penang and during festivals like Chinese New Year and *Ching Ming* it is seen as compulsory to visit the graves of one's closest relatives and attend to their spirits. Early one Sunday morning a week before the lunar New Year Tom and Mary thus gathered their family⁷ and got ready to visit Tom's parents grave. They had cooked his ancestor's favourite food and also brought a big bag of paper money which Tom had spent the last week folding. When they arrived at the grave they would place the different dishes in front of the tombstone together with the paper money which was burned at the end of the

⁶ Legend has it that the general of the Sung Dynasty attacked the Hokkiens in the Fujian province on the first day of the lunar month. To survive they hid in a sugar cane plantation and did not emerge until 9 days later, on the birthday of the Jade Emperor. The sugarcane plantation had saved their lives and since then Hokkien New Year has been celebrated with sugarcanes among the offerings as a sign of gratitude (The Star 26.February.2007).

⁷ Tom's siblings and their family's. According to the patrilineal tradition it is expected that the wife follow her husband's family to his ancestor's grave.



Hokkien New Year at the Chew Jetty and in the entrance of private home, February 2007.

ceremony. The food was to stay in front of the tombstone until the parents had “eaten” something which was determined by the tossing of two coins.⁸

Stuart E. Thompson’s (1988) extensive analysis of Chinese funeral rituals in Taiwan provides a useful insight into the ritual logic and the role that food plays as offerings to the dead. In his words:

“Ritual involves three prevalent facets in each of which food is immanent. First, ritual aims to transform. In the case of mortuary ritual the main problem is transforming the discontinuity of biological death into social continuity, of transforming the corpse into an ancestor (...) Second, ritual involves exchanges between the living and the dead, on more or less reciprocal bases. The presentation of foodstuff to the dead is vital in both senses of the word. Third, ritual is concerned with identity. To be Chinese is to perform Chinese ritual and vice versa; to be Chinese is also to eat Chinese-style food with Chinese-style implements” (Thompson 1988:73).

Thompson is here referring to the actual funeral ritual, but this can easily be extended to the offerings during Chinese New Year and other similar occasions. In Penang, as in Taiwan, food is given to the ancestors as a token of respect and serves to establish a kind of reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead. As Mary and Tom attended to their ancestor’s spirits they simultaneously secured their own future and the future of their children. Rituals and symbols uphold Chinese family unity over time and my informants argued that ancestor worship was a strong force within the Chinese community in Penang in spite of the long-distance relationship with their country of origin. The fact that the Chinese have common rituals which bring them together during celebrations and everyday activities, can be seen as an important unifying element. Tan Sooi Bengs (1988) analyses of the *Phor Tor* festival⁹ in Penang is an example that can provide further insight. She argues that such ritual events were given a new and more pragmatic function in Penang and first and foremost played a central role in the expression and maintenance of Chinese ethnic identity while simultaneously tying different Chinese sub-groups together (Tan 1988:28-29, 34-35). Like

⁸ This was done approximately every half hour so as not to rush the dead and it was only appropriate to remove the food when the coins fell down on the same side. The food was then usually taken home and eaten as apart of the reunion meal.

⁹ Also called the hungry ghost festival.

Thompson (1988:73) points out: “*To be Chinese is to perform Chinese rituals*”, and on this basis I will argue that rituals involving food, again rooted in the shared cosmology, are part of what distinguishes the Chinese in Penang as a group and provides them with a sense of belonging to a common moral community.

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to show how the Chinese community in Penang unite around one moral core as well as to give an idea of the important role food and eating plays in relation to this. I have argued that the Chinese in Penang share a common cosmological value system different from other communities on the island and that this moral order is part of what construct a unique group identity. I have used ideologies linked to family unity, collective responsibility, commensality and traditional Chinese rituals as examples of this common morality. Such internal markers of identity, or *basic value orientations* as Barth (1969:14) calls them, will however be expressed externally as well (*diacritical markers*). Moral communities always define themselves in proportion to other relevant communities and in the next chapter I will show how the value system of the Chinese and their significant “other”, the Malays, differs in relation to food. Food can in other words also be seen as explicit symbols of ethnic identity generating visible and socially experienced boundaries.

FIVE: Food as a vehicle for ethnic differentiation and boundaries

An early morning in May I was invited to a breakfast buffet with my colleagues from PCG at one of the most fashionable hotels in Georgetown. Jean, a middle-aged British anthropologist, Ray, a small Malay man in his 40's, and Mei Li, a Chinese lady in her late 50's, were all seated at a table set with white china and pastel napkins in the lush garden next to the hotels dining area. Despite being in the middle of Georgetown the hotel was surrounded by coconut trees and fragrant flowers and as it was situated at the seaside the sound of waves crushing against the shore drowned out the roaring traffic from the city. The breakfast was supposed to be a mix of business and pleasure and the idea was to discuss new products and design for PCG while enjoying a luxurious meal. Our main supplier, Anwar from KL, was present as well. He was a dark man with curly black hair in his late 40's and a close friend of Ray. After the first buffet "round" we all arrived at the table simultaneously, but before we could start eating Anwar raised his hand and asked hastily "*are you absolutely sure there is no pork meat in this?*" His plate was filled with egg, bacon and sausages and as he was a Malay Muslim I could easily understand his concern. Ray was, however, quick to reassure him that there would be no pork served at this hotel, and guaranteed that everything was prepared according to *halal* regulations. "*Otherwise I wouldn't eat here either*" he said, something which seemed to have a soothing effect on Anwar. He lowered his shoulders and took a bite of his (turkey) sausage while trying to explain his sudden anxiety to me. Pork

meat was the most disgusting substance he could imagine, something Ray heartily agreed on. They both had a deep loathing for pigs and unanimously stated that pork would remain inedible to them to their dying day. After a short silence Anwar laughed and announced in a humoristic tone that if *he* had been the Prime Minister of Malaysia one of his first priorities would have been to prohibit all *non-halal* food and *especially* pork. This, he said, would finally enable him and other Malays, to enjoy Chinese cuisine without the constant worry of being contaminated. “*It’s our country after all,*” he said smiling.

The Chinese love pork and it can therefore be found in most non-vegetarian Chinese dishes in Penang. As seen in the previous chapters eating usually takes place on the public arena and as pork is prohibited for Muslim Malays a highly visible division between the two groups emerges. The fact that a large part of the population on the island is inhibited from eating *non-halal* food is a central impediment for social interaction across ethnic lines in Penang and this chapter is therefore intended to show how this distance manifested itself in the daily lives of my informants.

According to Barth (1969:14-15) ethnic groups cannot exist in isolation but only in contrast to other such groups. In Penang the central contrast is between the Chinese and the Malays and food is one of the most striking ethnic markers. The conversation above is meant to illustrate how pork is picked out and made relevant as something that symbolizes a significant difference between the Chinese and the Malays. Pork is an ethnic marker which serves to highlight the limits of the cultural content of the two communities and I therefore argue that it can be a fruitful focus when trying to gain an understanding of ethnic relations in Penang.

Anwar’s sudden fright of being contaminated soon evolved into a discussion of nationhood. Indirectly he expressed that the only reason why the Chinese were still able to practice their culture (and for example eat pork) was because *the Malays let them*. As the indigenous people of Malaysia it should, however, be up to them to decide whether or not to withdraw this ‘permission’, especially if any of the practices conflicted with the dominating set of Malay moral values. Although Anwar’s opinion was aired in a joking tone among friends I will argue that it can serve as an illustrating starting point for a discussion of the relationship between the nation-state and ethnicity in Penang. For the purpose of this particular field setting I will use the interpretation of David Brown (1994:1) who suggests that ethnicity can be understood as an “ideology which individuals employ to resolve the insecurities arising

from the power structure within which they are located” (Brown 1994:1). Exactly what is meant by “*power structure*” might seem a bit diffuse, but in accordance with the material presented here it will point specifically to the dominating ideologies of the Malaysian nation-state and the influence these have upon the expression and understanding of ethnicity on the micro level. Using this kind of interpretation therefore presupposes that any exploration of ethnicity must begin with an investigation of the state.

The relevance of NEP and Islam

As outlined in the introduction Malaysia is regarded an indigenous state defined in racial terms. This implies that it is impossible for a Chinese Malaysian, or (in theory) any other foreign immigrant, to become Malay. My informants therefore knew that they would always be perceived as Chinese first and Malaysian second (Surydinata 1997:4-6, 31). If the state can be seen as a “third actor” (Barth 1994:183), as I’ve indirectly proposed above, ethnicity within the state can be understood as a reaction to or a component of the national ideology (Brown 1994:2), a relevant issue would be what the Chinese themselves see as the most problematic aspects of the nation-state in regard to their minority position. Among my informants in Penang the ‘disturbing elements’ most frequently referred to were doubtlessly NEP and Islam (see introduction). These were almost seen as two sides of the same coin as it could be argued that the legitimization of the first largely rested on the “shoulders” of the latter. Only those who belonged to the category *Bumiputera* were eligible to ‘reap the fruits’ from NEP’s affirmative action program and the most essential criteria for inclusion in this category was to be Muslim by faith and preferably also by origin. Chinese converts to Islam would not be included in the category although they would gain certain privileges from their conversion, something which naturally caused suspicion among many Malays who feared that they had economical motives.¹ A majority of the Chinese Muslims in Malaysia have, however, converted as a result of marrying a Malay and not first and foremost because of religious conviction.

¹ Muslims settlers from the Middle East on the other hand would more easily be associated with the *Bumiputeras* according to my informants. This might be due to the fact that they were “born” Muslim as well as the status deriving from their assumed affiliation with Prophet Muhammad.

According to Brown (1994:243-244) the implementation of NEP was the beginning of a direction towards a more Malay-Muslim dominated state ideology where the ethnic aspects, history, territory, and particularly religion, served to justify the special rights of the Malays. Brown also suggests that Islam became a political instrument for the Malays and yet another way to legitimize their superior position (Brown 1994:250,255). One of the most striking and visible ways this increasing Malay awareness of Islam manifested itself in the social everyday life of the two major ethnic groups was, however, in the form of conflicting eating practices and lack of commensality.

Purity and pollution – the act of eating in Islam

It can be stated that the Muslim revitalization in practice has led to a strengthening of the ethnic division in Malaysia and I will argue that the distance between Muslims and non-Muslims, Malays and Chinese, has increased as a result. This distance manifests itself through visible gender segregation, stricter ideals for female dressing,² and last but not least, through an enforcement of the Islamic eating regulations which is expressed most clearly by the antagonism between the Malay loathing and the Chinese love for pork meat (Anwar 1987:85-87).

It is however important to be aware of the fact that although the so-called pork ‘taboo’³ is (as I will show) legitimated through Islam on a theoretical and authoritative level, the reasons for its persistence among the common Malay population (and probably other Muslim populations throughout the world as well) might also be explained by other factors such as upbringing and it can therefore also be viewed as more of a cultural practice. For the purpose of this thesis it is nevertheless important to mention the religious foundation because the Chinese I met more often than not described the differences between *us* and *them* (the Malays) through the concepts of non-Muslim and Muslim. Islam is understood as an essential part of the Malay heritage and value system, and is in fact so strongly linked to Malay identity that a common expression for conversion was *masuk melayu* or to “enter into

² Most adult Malay women wear *tudong*, the Malay headscarf.

³ None of my informants referred to the prohibition against pork with the word “taboo”, yet it is a well known expression when referring to religiously rooted regulations regarding food, gender, sex etc. and I will therefore use it although I know that it might be a bit simplistic. For alternative explanations of the pork taboo see Douglas (1966) and Harris (1987).

“Malay-dom” (Chua and Raja 2001:172). The majority of the Chinese are on the other hand Buddhists or Taoists, and Chinese and Malay identity is therefore largely expressed (and understood by both the groups) through a set of idioms where the term “non-Malay” automatically implies Chineseness (Long 1988:6). My Chinese informants therefore unambiguously associated the pork taboo with Islam and saw it as one of the most important and visible expressions of the Muslim revitalization in the country. This does not mean that the strong reluctance to eat pork was a new thing within the Muslim community, but rather that the rigidity of the Muslim eating regulations in general had become reinforced since the implementation of Islam as the state religion in 1957. The aversion against pork thus became one of the leading symbols of a political and social change which, in the Chinese’s eyes, bore witness to a rather alerting prospect for the future (see the example of Andrew below).

The term *halal* is commonly used when referring to food in Islam. This term is first and foremost linked to meat and the manner in which an animal is slaughtered. All blood should be drained before the animal is killed and no livestock or game that has died of natural causes should be consumed. Prior to the slaughter a prayer should be recited and the animal’s head should be directed towards Mecca. Most importantly, pork meat is forbidden and the ritual slaughter must therefore take place in an area unpolluted by pigs (Khawaja 2001).

The normative and religious basis for the Muslim pork taboo and commitment to eat *halal* food is found in The Holy Qur’an where an extract from one of the legitimating paragraphs, surah 5,3,⁴ reads as follows:

“Forbidden unto you (for food) are carrion and blood and swine-flesh, and that which hath been dedicated unto any other than Allah (...)” (Pickthall 1948)

In Malaysia, *Perekim*, the Muslim welfare organization, has produced a pamphlet called *Invitation to understand Islam series* aimed to enlighten the non-believers in the country. Pamphlet no.17 is dedicated to “Eating in Islam” and begins by stating that; “In Islam, one does not eat to meet a physical need or for pleasure”, the reason for eating is on the other

⁴ See also surah 6.146 and 2.173

hand to “support the body to worship Allah The Most sufficient”. To explain why pork is forbidden the pamphlet refers to the medical dangers but stresses that the main reason Muslims abstain from this meat is “to obey the command of Allah The All-Knowing”. All food must be “clean, pure and safe (*halal*)” and finally it is pointed out that:

“Muslims are discouraged from being in company of others who are consuming prohibited food (for example intoxicants⁵) as it may give the impression to others that he/she is approving their act of sin”

The violent dislike for pork is however not simply religious as it becomes an embodied aversion firmly imprinted into Malay children from a very young age. I met many Malay’s who considered themselves secular and would drink alcohol and eat *non-halal* food; yet eating pork (or even having pork on the table) was completely out of the question. Anwar and Ray, from the beginning of this chapter, is an example. They were both non-practicing Muslims brought up in liberal families. Ray was openly gay (a sin according to the Qur’an⁶) and none of them adhered to the Qur’anic prohibition against alcohol.⁷ Pork meat was a different matter though. Ray argued that in his case the fear of this substance was not caused by religion, but rather by what he called “*cultural brainwashing*”. He did not regard himself as religious and therefore felt no need to comply with the rules laid down in the Qur’an. However, he could not escape the fact that he had been brought up in a Muslim family where his parents constantly had reminded him of the dangers pork meat represented. In his view this had eventually led to what he called a “*totally illogical aversion against anything related to pigs*”. The principle against alcohol and intoxicants on the other hand was not as heavily imprinted on him as even his mother enjoyed a glass of wine once in a while. Ray, who held a degree from a British university, said that he knew very well that pork meat did not represent a significant health risk and admitted that the idea of contamination was “*just in his head*”. However, this did not change the fact that he found pork absolutely repulsive and therefore could not imagine ever eating it. To illustrate further how strongly he felt about

⁵ Intoxicants refer to anything that alters the state of mind and first and foremost to alcohol. Alcohol is forbidden to Muslims and violation of this rule can actually lead to punishment according to sharia regulations. In Giant, one of the biggest supermarket chains in Malaysia, a sign was put up next to the cashier stating that persons under the age of 18 and Muslims are not allowed to buy alcohol.

⁶ A view legitimated through surah 7.80-84, 26.165-166, 27.54-58 and 29.28-35.

⁷ See for example surah 5.91

this he told me about his Chinese ex-boyfriend. According to Ray, their different ethnic affiliation had not been a problem except when it came to food and eating, because:

“Like most Chinese he was addicted to pork and I had to force him to brush his teeth thoroughly after every meal, otherwise I wouldn’t go near him, let alone kiss him! Once, I actually asked him to bring his toothbrush to a restaurant because I knew he would end up eating pork at some point during the evening.”

This story shows that Ray *was* able to be intimate with a pork eating Chinese as long as some precautions were made. He also managed to sit at a table where pork was consumed or eat food prepared in a *non-halal* kitchen. However he did not make a secret out of the amount of agony these kinds of situations caused him and later he even indicated to me that the fear of being contaminated was one of the reasons it didn’t work out between him and the Chinese guy in the long run.

Another example is Dr. Omar, a professor at USM, who discussed this issue with me on a couple of occasions. In contrast to Ray, Dr. Omar used his Muslim faith to justify his pork phobia and he confessed that to even be near people eating pork would be unthinkable for him. As a practicing Muslim he also abstained from alcohol, yet this was not such an emotionally charged topic. Although he was aware of the paradox he said it would be easier to hang out in a bar and sit next to people drinking beer than to be seated around a table at a *non-halal kopi tiam* where pork was consumed.

From these examples it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that the indoctrination of the pork taboo is stronger than the one regarding alcohol in Malay Islam. Ray might not be representative for the Malay population as a whole, but the fact that he belonged to the most liberal group is, in my opinion, exactly what makes his case illuminating. It gives an idea of how deeply embedded the fear of being contaminated by pork is even among secular Muslims. It is in other words one of the very last things a Muslim will give up, whether he or she is practicing the religion or not (Khader 2002).

“The Chinese eat anything on four legs, except chairs”

The Chinese have been dedicated pork eaters for about 10 000 years and today China produces and consumes far more pork than any other country in the world. *The* meat in the

hokkien cuisine is pork (*bak*) and the Chinese in Penang are therefore no exception (Anderson 1972:140). The centrality of pork in Chinese culture and diet is still reflected in the language and the Chinese character for meat is in fact synonymous with pork. The character for roof and the one for pig put together, on the other hand, means *home* or *family*. Pork also symbolises virility and is said to be a good source of nutrition for pregnant women and new mothers (Jack 28.04.2008).

According to the Chinese almost any part of the pig can be consumed and in Penang anything from the pig stomach to its trotters would be used (see chapter three). Even slabs of pig's blood were incorporated in certain dishes like *curry mee*. The coagulated blood would be cut into cubes and added on top of the noodle dish.⁸

Although the Chinese adhere to an elaborate system of food, health and balance they have virtually no food taboos and according to a popular saying they “*eat anything on four legs, except chairs.*” This does not mean that they are accustomed to eat all kinds of food though. But in theory there are few rules preventing them from trying out new and exotic dishes and ingredients. Chinese cuisine is therefore very adaptable, a quality that comes in handy in the context of Penang. Van den Berghe (1984:393) points out that one of the easiest ways to cross ethnic boundaries is through eating ethnic food and I will argue that the Chinese lack of taboos enables them to do just that. According to Tan's study (2001) the adaptability of the Chinese diet is a quality that makes it possible for them to maintain commensality with all Malaysians, Muslim and non-Muslim.

Commensality is often regarded the number one facilitator of social relations between persons and groups, but as indicated this is far from a straightforward matter in Penang. Interaction between non-Muslims and Muslims in the context of food is seen as *susah* which means difficult or troublesome and according to Tan (2001:148-149) the two concepts, *sama makan* and *tak sama makan* are frequently used by Malaysians to differentiate between those who can eat together and those who cannot. *Sama makan* is not so much about necessarily eating the *same food* as having no inhibitions to sit at the same table and *eat together*. This way of differentiating between people was highly relevant in Penang, but although most of my informants were familiar with the terms they were rarely used openly in everyday

⁸ Noodles with spicy coconut milk-based gravy, garnished with bean sprouts, prawns, cockles, bean curd puffs, fishballs and cuttlefish.

speech. When asked, Kevin stated that he didn't see the need for them as the concepts of *halal* and *non-halal*, in his opinion, referred to the same division. Tom, on the other hand, explained that they were seen as inappropriate, something which was confirmed by Noor, a Malay schoolgirl who worked at PHM. She said:

“Usually if my Chinese friends eat in Chinese or non-halal restaurants, I'd still go in and sit at the same table but won't order the food. And I don't think it [sama makan, tak sama maka] is really frequently used either, most of the people I know have the same attitude as me. Most Chinese would frequent halal restaurants if they are in Muslim company though”.

“I guess it is deemed inappropriate because most Chinese are polite about eating pork in front of Muslims. They really respect our religious obligation and would rather not eat pork in front of us. They also do the same during Ramadan, when the Muslims fast. They would not eat in front of us during the fasting month either.”

Although Noor, like most of my Malay informants, represented the more liberal part of the Malay population, her reaction might indicate that the terms *sama makan* and *tak sama makan* were pretty unpopular in Penang. The differentiation these terms refers to nevertheless exists, something which is evident even in Noor's case. She would indeed sit with her Chinese friends in *non-halal* restaurants if she *had to*, but commensality would not be obtained unless her Chinese friends adjusted to her religious obligations and went with her to *halal* venues. Commensality (*sama makan*) between the two groups is in other words prevented due to one single food item, namely pork. I therefore find the terms *sama makan* and *tak sama makan* useful as a tool in my analysis although I'm aware of the fact that they were not articulated on a frequent basis among local Penangites.

Based on my own findings, and in line with Tan's observations, I will argue that food plays an important part in inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia and that the Chinese-Malay boundary can be symbolized by eating or not eating pork (Tan 2001:146). Due to their lack of food taboos the Chinese are however able to cross this boundary fairly easily, but as the Malays are inhibited from doing the same this is what we can call an *asymmetric process*. Food becomes an exclusive ethnic marker for the Chinese only, while Malay food can be eaten by anyone (Chua and Rajah 2001:180).

The Islamization of Chinese food

In the 1960's it was not uncommon to see Chinese and Malays eat together even in places which were *non-halal*. The introduction of stricter Muslim guidelines (like the ones pointed out in *Perekim's* pamphlet above) has however changed this and today Malays and Chinese are rarely seen together in restaurants as a result (Chua and Raja 2001:180). This situation has led to the emergence of an interesting variation of Chinese food made of *halal* ingredients and cooked without pork or lard. Chua and Rajah (2001:179) call the development of this "new cuisine" "The Islamization of Chinese food" and argue that the expanding market for *halal* Chinese food is a result of the asymmetrical nature of the ethnic boundary (mentioned above). Another reason could be the growing number of Chinese converts to Islam. As they embrace Islam they are no longer allowed to eat pork and therefore provide new customers to the *halal* Chinese food industry. A great number of the Chinese dishes and ingredients are however already so incorporated into the Malaysian cuisine (like noodles for example) that there is a significant market for *halal* Chinese food even on street level. Tan (2001:144) note that there is a class dimension to the issue. Rich Malays frequent expensive hotels where all Chinese food is *halal*. They are in other words used to Chinese food and can even eat with chopsticks. Other classes are less familiar with it because most cheap Chinese places are *non-halal*. The front markers of Penang cuisine (*hokkien mee, char kway teow* etc.) were thus, up until recently, more or less reserved for the Chinese population. With the rise of *halal* Chinese food venues, however, these dishes are now also prepared according to *halal* regulations in a growing number of Malay hawker stalls around the island. In addition all government institutions and most public buildings like shopping malls and hotels are "pork free zones" in Malaysia and Tan (2001:147) notes that the "non-Muslims have "conceded" to this arrangement, which helps to avoid inter-group conflict on food consumption". These restaurants offer a convenient compromise for commensality as they (in theory) enable the two groups to obtain *sama makan* in areas unpolluted by pork.

Chua and Rajah (2001:181) argue that instead of seeing this type of food as an insipid version of "pure" Chinese food one should rather see it as a kind of cultural hybridization (see chapter four). Hybridization involves the crossing of culturally constructed boundaries but can, according to them, also be the product of absence. Many Chinese however view this kind of food as inferior because it lacks, what to them is the most central ingredient. When

asked, my Chinese informants therefore said they preferred to eat *non-halal* food which they described as tastier. To go for the *halal* version did in other words require adjustments on their part, and in my experience this was an adjustment they were not always ready to make. The size of the Chinese population in Penang makes it unnecessary for the Chinese hawkers to cater to Muslims and despite the fact that *halal* food has taken over public canteens, hotel restaurants and eating venues in shopping complexes, it should be noted that the large majority of Chinese street hawkers continue to cook traditional Chinese dishes containing pork.

”They won’t even eat from our cutlery” – Chinese frustrations in a bowl of noodles

The opposition between Malays and Chinese on the issue of pork first and foremost results in segregation on the food arena and as most food in Penang is consumed in public this issue generates a very visible division between the two groups. *Halal* and *non-halal* food are usually sold in separate outlets although some foodcourts are split into two areas where the Chinese food is sold on one side and the Malay (and sometimes Indian) *halal* food is sold on the other. However, in these cases, the foodcourt is often physically divided by a wall or a hedgerow and the two groups will eat in separate and secluded parts of the dining area. According to Tan (2001:146-147) there is a range of unwritten rules which applies to the Chinese-Malay interaction when it comes to food and eating. If a Malay and a Chinese go out for dinner they will for example always eat in a *halal* venue. A Malay would thus never be invited to a Chinese lunch or dinner party taking place in a *non-halal* hawker centre or restaurant. Weddings might be an exception though. According to my informants an 8-course dinner is normally served, but in cases where Malays are invited they will usually be presented with their own separate table and served pork free food (although many Malays would feel that this arrangement still involved a great risk of contamination). For a Malay to visit a Chinese in his home is a complicated matter. Some Malays feel uneasy even when drinking from cups coming from a Chinese household, as they fear they might have been in contact with pork (for example when being washed with other utensils). Chinese hosts thus tend to serve Malay guests with canned or packed drinks so not to raise any unnecessary suspicion (Tan 2001:147). Politeness, as Noor also pointed out above, is a highly regarded virtue within both the ethnic groups, something which is seen as necessary to avoid potential conflicts in everyday life. In relation to this I found an article in The Star (11.05.2007),

written by one of the youngest and most liberal Malay Muftis in Malaysia with the title *Muslims can use cutlery in non-Muslim homes*:

“There is no need for Muslims to be overly concerned with the cutlery used at the homes of their non Muslim friends, says Perlis mufti Dr Nohd Asri Zainul Abidin. He said that as long as the food served was halal, there should be no worries about consuming it, adding that some Muslims were known to have reservation using cups, plates and other utensils in non-Muslim homes (...) “What’s the use of paying a visit to the homes of our non-Muslim friends if we feel we can’t eat or drink there?” (...) “For Muslims, there is a religious merit in doing good to both other Muslims and non-Muslims.”

Comments like: “*They won’t even eat from our cutlery*” were frequently used by my informants in an attempt to put their resentment and frustration into words. The fact that the risk of contamination was finally repudiated by a prominent Muslim was therefore by many viewed as a step in the right direction. A Chinese Malaysian from KL even wrote a “thank you note” in the same newspaper the following week (17.05.2007) stating that the Mufti had pinpointed a very important aspect of the inter-ethnic relations in the country. Adding that it was important for all groups to be able “*to practice a little give and take*” when living in such a multi- racial and multi-religious society.

To refuse to share food or drink is, according to Van den Berghe (1984:390), universally interpreted as a sign of distrust and in Penang the Muslim Malay fear of being contaminated is, in extreme cases, extended to apply to all pork eating people in general (i.e. the Chinese). In relation to this Lim told me about an experience he’d just had with a Malay doctor. She had consistently refused to touch him and when she was supposed to locate the problem areas she used a pen in order to avoid making skin contact. In Lim’s view this was a typical example of Malay indignation towards the Chinese as pork eaters and eventually part of what generated conflict between the two groups. The incident might however also be explained by the fact that Lim was a man and that the doctor’s Muslim faith prohibited her from touching members of the opposite sex (unless they were related to her). Lim’s interpretation was therefore only *one* possible scenario, but the fact that *he believed* that his consumption of pork meat was the underlying reason is remarkable in itself. This suggests that some Chinese even believe that Malays regard Chinese bodies as contaminated by pork and therefore are reluctant to be in close proximity to them in general.

Lim's story was not unique and a conversation I had with Min, a Chinese girl in Su Yin's temple provides a similar example. Su Yin was an anthropology student about a year younger than me whom I had gotten to know through Dr. Omar at USM. She was a dedicated Buddhist and eager to introduce me to Buddha's teachings. On May, 1st, all Buddhists celebrate *Wisak day* in order to honour Buddha's birth and enlightenment and I was invited to join Su Yin and her friends. *Wisak day* is marked by a four hour's long procession through Georgetown and each Buddhist temple and association have their own banners and t-shirts. The temple Su Yin belonged to had white T-shirts with the name of the temple/association next to a big Tigers beer sign, as they were the sponsors. Their procession was also going to consist of eight girls and eight boys wearing a special Tibetan costume and unexpectedly I was asked to be one of the girls. We spent the morning in the temple preparing for the procession while Min, the girl who was responsible for the Tibetan costume, made sure that we knew what we were supposed to do. Min was a girl around my age with porcelain skin and long brown hair which she constantly waved out of her face. As she handed me the Tibetan dress, she asked, full of expectation what I thought about the temple. I told her how impressed I was and she explained that it was partly owned by the association and partly rented, as they weren't able to pay for all of it yet. "*It is open to anyone, except Muslims of course!*" she added. This comment puzzled me and I asked why Muslims weren't admitted. Min gracefully shook her head, and her hair fell into her face again. It was unthinkable to welcome a Muslim into the temple. "*That would only cause trouble*" she said, "*not only for them but for the Muslim as well*". Muslims could not visit any other places of worship than their own: That was common knowledge! The Chinese Buddhists, on the other hand, were less conservative and could therefore visit any place of worship if they so wished, she continued, "*except mosques of course!*" Later on in the conversation it became clear that, according to Min's view, the underlying reason why Chinese Buddhists couldn't visit Malay Mosques and vice-versa was the Chinese consumption of pork. She claimed that the Malays saw the Chinese as contaminated and were reluctant to let them into their mosques in fear of pollution. She herself was a vegetarian but argued that this was irrelevant to the Malays. She was a Chinese and thus by definition "a pork eater". This and the foregoing example suggest that the aspect of pork-contamination might also apply to circumstances not directly linked to the arena of food. Naturally not all Malays act this way, but the fact that a few do is taken as a provocation by many Chinese. To be viewed as contaminated to the extent that some Malays even have moral issues when dealing with them in daily life is by many Chinese described as degrading

and thus a source of frustration and conflict between the two groups. This also suggests that although it is highly possible for the Chinese to dine in *halal* restaurants, “*sama makan*” isn’t necessarily obtained. In extreme cases where Malays refuse to eat with the Chinese on a general basis the pork issue will come between the two groups and prevent commensality even on the *halal* arena.

Lack of knowledge and mutual understanding

Min’s explanation of why Mosques is off boundary to non-Muslims and especially to the Chinese, as well as the presumption that Muslims are prohibited from visiting other places of worship, is an indicator of the limited knowledge Chinese Malaysians have of Islam. The polarisation starts as early as in elementary school when the pupils are given separate tuition according to religious affiliation. Muslims are sent to Islam classes while the rest do a general course in moral –called *Moral studies*. According to my informants this generates a divide which lasts throughout the school years and continues into their adult lives and an example of the religious ignorance is the misconception that Mosques are a “closed shop” to the Chinese.

When I visited Emilie and her family in KL early on in my fieldwork one of the sights I was eager to see was the State Mosque. I’ve always been fascinated by mosque architecture and it didn’t occur to me that this could be problematic as I’ve visited several mosques in Europe and the Middle East before. My request seemed to surprise Emilie though, and she told me in a serious tone that none of her family members had ever been inside a mosque and that she was pretty sure it was illegal for non-Muslims. It took a lot of convincing but in the end Emilie and her father agreed to come with me and at least have a look at the building from the outside. However, after realising that other tourists were entering and that there were special cloaks and headscarves which women could borrow in order to cover up, they reluctantly decided to join me and check out the inside as well. It all turned out to be a great experience for all three of us⁹ and afterwards Emilie and her father said that they were grateful that I’d pressured them a little as they never would have thought of visiting a mosque by themselves.

⁹ Except for some minor incidents which will be described in chapter six

The religious dimension of ethnicity is increasingly important in Penang as it can be argued that this is where the Chinese and the Malay culture and moral value systems differs the most. Islam is alien to the Chinese,¹⁰ the school system does not encourage such education and as a result understanding across religious boundaries is rarely established. The Chinese feel uneasy about the increasing Islamization of the country and I will argue that the lack of religious knowledge, and the fact that Chinese and Muslim values are in opposition in a range of areas, generate a situation of mutual mistrust. In line with this, Andrew, a member of Su Yin's temple, expressed his concerns for the future in an informal interview:

"It is scary to see how Malaysia is transforming and the hold that Islam now has on the country. I don't like the idea of being associated with a Muslim country and honestly I think it is an encroachment on the Chinese Malaysians which after all represent a third of the Malaysian population."

"The Chinese fought for independence in 1957 side by side with the Malay's and their opinion should also be heard and respected. At the moment this is not the case though and I'm worried about the future, especially when I think of my daughter."

Andrew was married to an Indonesian Chinese who had lived in the country for 11 years and they had a 12 year old daughter together. In spite of her long-term stay she still resided in the country on a tourist visa. This was a situation Andrew found absolutely untenable and bitterly unfair. If she'd been a Muslim Indonesian she would have gotten her resident permit immediately, he complained. According to Andrew it was even easier for Arab Muslims from the Middle East to achieve permanent residency in Malaysia.

"Everything down here is either fattening or sensitive"

Andrew's frustrations were far from unique and I was often told similar stories by my Chinese informants. Their situation as an ethnic minority in a country where the majority population's religion and economical position were favoured made them feel inferior and I often heard things like; *"it's their [the Malays] country, we're only renting it"* or *"this country is no good lah, no opportunities for us [the Chinese] here!"* A general view was that

¹⁰ As well as Buddhism and Taoism is alien to the Malays

the government was to blame, and the sentence *“It’s not the Malays, but the government”* seemed to be almost compulsory when discussing these kind of issues. Another general view was that the topic was extremely sensitive and it could therefore be very risky for a Chinese to express his or her opinions in public. A British expatriate in his 70s who had lived in Penang half of his life and was well known by the locals in Georgetown once told me that the essence of what he’d learned while residing on the island was that *“everything down here was either fattening or sensitive”*. It was meant as a joke and he chuckled clearly pleased with his own quick wittedness. In retrospect, however, I see this sentence as a quite striking description of the way I experienced social life in Penang as well. Important and sensitive issues like ethnic tension were always discussed over food and my informants therefore usually brought it up during meals. The various Chinese eating venues served as convenient places to discuss such topics as my informants could be sure there would be no Malays around. Nevertheless they always lowered their voices and bent over the table when telling me stories about the unfair system and what many characterized as ethnic discrimination. Mr. Chew, my neighbour, once brought me to a foodcourt nearby Tom and Mary’s house in order to discuss the issue. The food court was one of the most chaotic and busy ones in MacAllister road and the sound of hawkers frying up their specialities mixed with the humming fans and the chattering from innumerable lunch guests made it almost impossible for anyone to overhear our conversation. Mr. Chew started up by saying that it was a good thing that I’d chosen to study the Chinese in Penang. In contrast to many other overseas Chinese communities the Chinese here had kept their traditions and in his opinion they were *“more Chinese than the Chinese in China.”* This, he argued, was due to the modernization process in Mainland China, something which had not affected them as much since they lived in a country lead by Malays. The fact that they didn’t have the same rights as the Malays prevented them from being assimilated in the same fashion as the Chinese in US for example. He argued that the Chinese identity and culture heritage were an extremely strong force within the Chinese community and that the majority probably would define themselves as Chinese first and Malaysian second. This was also due to government policies he said and leaned forward almost whispering: *“The government keep reminding me that I’m Chinese and not Malaysian, that I’m a second class citizen.”*

What Mr. Chew pointed out during this conversation was in other words the heightened ethnic consciousness caused by the affirmative action (NEP) and the fact that the Chinese live in a country dominated by Muslims. The Chinese in Malaysia face the problem of being

situated within Malaysian space without being recognized as a part of the Malaysian society and history. The Malaysian state seeks to define their identity, but the Chinese use a number of strategies to nullify these identifications and the constitution of a special Chinese group identity in Penang must be understood in this context (Ong 1997:206, 207). In line with this Ye Lin-Sheng (2005) has written a book called *The Chinese Dilemma*¹¹ in which he states that:

“A Malaysian Chinese is Chinese first and Malaysian second because being differentiated from *Bumiputeras* heightens his sense of communal identity. It makes him feel that even if he wanted to, he can't be Chinese any more than he can choose to be Malay. You might say that he is Chinese whether he likes it or not, or that he is Chinese in spite of himself: communal politics has seen to that” (Ye 2005:138).

According to this and in line with Brown's (1994:1) interpretation of ethnicity (see beginning of the chapter) it can therefore be argued that the Chinese in Penang stick to their Chinese identity as a kind of resistance. Their Chineseness becomes an instrument used as a way to handle the situation they find themselves in. This is also seen in the way they consciously observe the Chinese rituals in daily life as well as on special occasions like Chinese New Year, Ching Ming, Phor Tor and a series of other important events laid out in the lunar calendar. As shown in chapter three, food is an important element in many of these celebrations and thus a way for the Chinese to express their ethnic identity. They are proud of their cuisine and use it as a vehicle to show who they are as well as who they are not.

Conclusion

In chapter three I dealt with the Chinese community and saw food as an integral part of what constructed a core of ethnic and moral unity among the Chinese in Penang. As shown in this chapter, however, food can also operate as an external marker for ethnic identity. Barth (1969) invites us to shift the focus from the content of ethnic identity (dress, language, food etc.) to a focus on the boundaries that mark the limits of such content. Ethnic boundaries

¹¹ A title doubtlessly referring back to the infamous book, *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), written by the previous Prime Minister in Malaysia, Mahathir Bin Mohammad.

persist, according to Barth, despite a flow of personnel and information across them. He also ascertained that without boundaries there would be no ethnic groups (Barth 1969:14-15).

This is not to say that the cultural content of a group is irrelevant though, but as Barth states:

“The features that are taken into account are not the sum of ‘objective’ differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant”
(Barth 1969:14).

Ethnic markers are in other words never fixed or given by nature. Which specific marker is made relevant depends on the situation and is always a result of choice (Barth 1969:14).

As a part of the cultural content I have argued that food is highlighted in order to establish ethnic boundaries between the Chinese and Malays in Penang. The relevance of food is striking and the fact that ethnic cuisine and ingredients are chosen as leading identifiers is not coincidental as it is an extremely visible and concrete way to create and maintain boundaries. Difference is always played out in relation to relevant “others” and from a Chinese viewpoint the significant “other” is the Muslim Malay. To eat pork is not an inevitable part of Chineseness, but the political and religious situation in the country has made it crucial for them to cling to what they see as one of the defining features of their ethnic community. The fact that they continue to use pork to such a high extent can therefore be seen as a kind of symbolic resistance to the political and religious development in the country. The national ideology promoting the *Bumiputera* policy and the increasing islamization has since independence generated a feeling of not being treated as equally valuable citizens. This shows that citizenship and nationhood are two different things. Citizenship gives a person the legal right to reside in a country, but it does not guarantee cultural, political or emotional attachment (Surydianta 2004:7).

This leads us on to the last chapter where I will discuss the ambiguous situation of the Chinese in Penang, who in a sense are “trapped” between the Malaysian and Chinese nation-state. Food and eating does not only serve to highlight boundaries, but can also help to bridge them. The changing foodways of the Chinese, due to their long-term presence in the Malaysian environment, can therefore be viewed as an attempt to negotiate for a localised Chinese identity, that is, an identity as Malaysians on their own terms.

SIX: Between Malaysian nationalism and Chinese transnationalism

The dynamic aspect of food

“What a Chinese Malaysian eats reflects his or her local Chinese identity and the multi-ethnic nature of the Malaysian society” (Tan 2001:140).

When I told people in Georgetown that I lived with the Choo family in *Jalan Keramat* (*Keramat* street) nobody seemed to know where that was or who the family Choo might be. But when I added that they ran a *nyonya* restaurant called “Mary’s Nyonya Food” their face brightened; “Ah! *The best nyonya food in town*” they exclaimed with a fond smile before turning to their friends to ask; “hey, did you guys know that Sol lives at Mary’s?...*excellent food eh?*” And indeed it was. As time passed I became a regular customer and for special occasions, like when my sister came from Norway to visit, Mary and Tom would go out of their way to make sure that we got to taste all their specialities and singlehandedly served us while explaining about the ingredients and significance of each dish. Mary came from a *Peranakan* family and had learned all her cooking skills from her late mother. She was proud of her heritage and referred to *nyonya* food as her *national cuisine*.

Nyonya food is a good example of the dynamic aspect of food in an ever-changing, global and transnational world. The fact that Mary referred to it as *her national cuisine* is interesting as *nyonya* food can be viewed as the prime example of fusion food in Penang. It can be described as an innovated cuisine in which the best from both cultures are mixed, not “pure” Malay, and not “pure” Chinese, but something in between which nevertheless reflects Chinese identity only.

The identity of the ethnic Chinese in Penang is not only constructed in relation to their origin in Mainland China, but also in relation to the Malaysian nation state. In other words, it is a result of *both* being Chinese in Malaysia and Chinese away from China and the same can be said about the Chinese cuisine in Penang. In this chapter I will therefore discuss the implications of Malaysian nationalism and Chinese transnationalism (and inevitably the globalization process) on the study of Chinese food and identity. I will use the example of *nyonya* food in particular to show the dynamic aspect of Chinese food on the island and the process in which borrowing and innovation have resulted in a completely unique hybrid cuisine which functions as both ethnic and national marker for the Chinese.

One of the ways in which diasporic communities maintain their “original” identity is through ideas, preparation and consumption of food (Bell & Valentine 1997:91). However, as I will show in this chapter, being Chinese in Malaysia is ambiguous. On one hand they are proud of the ancient traditions they brought with them from their ancestor land, but on the other they do not identify with the Chinese in the People’s Republic of China (“PRC- people”), they see themselves as Malaysians.

Chinese food will be the centre of attention and I will focus my analysis on how this cuisine has been reinvented and transformed in the “new” cultural setting of Penang. The influence has of course also gone in the opposite direction, that is; Chinese cuisine has affected other ethnic foodways on the island. This is for example evident in the popularity of Malay and Indian noodle dishes like *mee rebus* and *mee goreng*, Chinese *halal* food and, in its widest sense also in the fact that eating out has become such a common practice, a custom most likely adapted from the Chinese (Tan 2002:160).

A constant recreation of food and identity

The study of Chinese food outside of Mainland China is useful, not only to explain internal conditions in the host country, but also to explore the dynamic aspect of the food culture. That is; the continuity, transformation and innovation that occurs when it is taken out of its original context. Globalization has made everything less place-bound and this has implications for the study of both food and identity. It is therefore important to recognize the influence of not only national politics and cultural discourse, but also transnational bonds (Tan 2001:126).

As shown in the previous chapter Chinese cuisine has few taboos and is therefore very adaptable. The Chinese in Penang might cling to their Chinese heritage, but that does not mean that they are immune to the influence of the multiethnic environment in which they find themselves. Tan (2001:154) identifies three main aspects of cultural transformation in a multiethnic context: cultural continuity, direct borrowing and creative innovation. Cultural continuity implies that over time even what is deemed “traditional” will change in some way or another. The underlying cultural principles will still be recognizable, but agents and individuals will change the manifest form. Food recipes are inherited from generation to generation and a natural consequence of this (and the changing supply of ingredients etc.) is that the dishes are slowly (yet maybe unnoticeably at first) modified over time. Direct borrowing is on the other hand when ingredients and cooking principles are consciously or unconsciously borrowed from other ethnic cuisines. And last, but not least, food cultures can change due to innovation. This is a creative and conscious recreation of cuisines and should not be confused with direct borrowing. Both local resources and unconventional means are used in the process and the result is often something that has never been seen before. It is nevertheless important to notice that these kinds of cuisines are still locally produced and always largely resonate on the identity of one group more than others. Cultural continuity, direct borrowing and creative innovation are all present in Penang and are thus useful principles when studying changing foodways and identities in this context.

The case of nyonya food

The hawker tradition in Penang is dynamic in that it allows for innovation and is sensitive to local taste. It is also possible for the customers to alter their particular dish according to their

preferences. That is, ask for more or less of specific ingredients. The result is a number of dishes that has evolved over time. I will deal more with hawker food later in this chapter, but right now I'd like to turn the attention to one particular cuisine, and maybe one of the best examples of innovative cultural transformation, namely *nyonya* food.

The highly spiced *nyonya* cuisine is a fusion of Chinese and Malay (and in Penang; Thai) ingredients which has emerged out of the *peranakan* culture. *Nyonya* refer to female¹ *peranakans* and their recipes have gone from mother to daughter for generations. In the introduction I defined the *peranakan* culture as a tradition made up of Chinese and Malay elements resulting from intermarriage between the first Chinese immigrants and local Malay women. Lee (2004:146) however, describes the phenomenon like this in her book *Malaysian flavours*:

“When two different cultures come into contact the dominant culture usually takes over and the members from the smaller culture group become assimilated into the larger culture group. The fascinating thing about the *peranakan* community was that this did not take place. Instead a distinctively different culture evolved, synthesising elements from both Malay and Chinese cultures. The *peranakan* culture is essentially Chinese in form and Malay in essence.”

This tradition is in other words not just a random mix of Chinese and Malay elements, but a unique culture with a whole cuisine of its own. It is impossible not to notice the influence of the *peranakan* culture in Penang and as Mr. Chew (Mary and Tom's neighbour) pointed out during one of our conversations, it was highly necessary for me to take this perspective into account when studying Chinese identity on the island. According to him a majority of the Chinese Penangites would in fact identify with the *peranakan* culture.² They might not be *peranakan* by genes, he said, but would still be sympathetic towards its values and material expressions. Mr. Chew, who himself was not genetically *peranakan*³ still claimed to be

¹ The term for male *peranakans* is *baba*.

² Today only Chinese can be a part of this hybrid culture

³ There are very few genetic *peranakans* left as a consequence of the Muslim revitalisation in the country. The big contrast between Chinese- Malay marriages today, where the non-Muslim part are obliged to convert, and the inter-marriage giving rise to the *peranakan* culture mirrors the social, political and religious change in the country since the 19th century (Chua & Raja 2001:172).

peranakan by what he called “outlook on life.” His definition of a true *peranakan* was accordingly: “An adopted child with foreign origin [Chinese] who fits perfectly into this society. Who accepts the culture of the adoptive parent [the Malays], blending that culture harmoniously with his own.”

The *peranakan* tradition involves a range of cultural elements, dress, language and general values, but in this thesis *peranakan food* will be the topic of discussion. The unique blend of Chinese and Malay ingredients and cooking principles results in a wide selection of *nyonya* dishes with a unique and distinctive taste and structure. These are available in numerous restaurants throughout the island and some popular dishes, like *Penang asam laksa*,⁴ are also sold by street hawkers. Next to Malacca, Penang (Southern and Northern tradition) formed the Strait Settlement making it one of the centres for *nyonya* food.

Mary’s restaurant had been open for about seven years and had slowly gained foothold in the Penang food market. Mary remembered how it all started with a smile. She had always been fond of her mother’s cooking and used to watch her curiously in the kitchen when she was a young girl. However, setting up her own restaurant was not possible until she retired from the cosmetic industry at age 55. Her two younger sisters joined her and they started “Mary’s Nyonya food” in the vacant pre-war house next door. Mary was the driving force behind the project and it was clear from the beginning that this was going to be *her* business. According to Tom, Mary’s mother, Susan, had passed on most of the recipes directly to her as she was the oldest daughter and had a natural talent for cooking. “*She is irreplaceable for the business*”, Tom added, something which was proven when she fell ill and had to spend a week in hospital about four months into my fieldwork. With her absence the business was in trouble and although she was instructed by the doctor to rest when she was released, she ended up spending most of her convalescent time guiding her staff through the recipes in the restaurant kitchen.

Starting a restaurant on an island literally overrun by *kopi tiams*, restaurants and hawker stalls requires more than just a talent for cooking though, and Tom stressed that it was highly important to have a carefully planned strategy and a “nose” for business as well. It had been some hard years in the beginning and Mary recalled getting up at 5.30 AM every morning to

⁴ Rice noodles in a hot and sour, fish-based gravy topped with lots of aromatic herbs such as torch ginger flower and lemongrass.

prepare the breakfast menu. These days the restaurant didn't open until 11.30 AM and they only sold lunch and dinner as Mary felt that *nyonya* food was best suited for these meals. By now the restaurant was well known in Penang and they had a large number of regular customers who had followed their business from the humble beginning. The tables (especially in the air-conditioned indoors areas) were fully booked almost every night and sometimes even during lunchtime. As *nyonya* food is *non-halal* and contains pork the customers were almost exclusively Chinese although some European tourists also stopped by occasionally.

Nyonya food consists of rice and a range of side dishes made up of different types of meat as well as vegetables. The menu in Mary's restaurant was written in Malay as most *nyonya* dishes have local Malay names and it had a separate section for dishes containing pork, chicken, beef, seafood, and vegetables. The structure of a *Nyonya* meal is similar to the "pure" Chinese in that it is specifically meant for commensality and in fact Tom and Mary argued that it was a type of food that could not be eaten by one person alone. The whole idea was to combine different tastes and ingredients and therefore, the more people sharing, the better. In order to have enough space for such large groups the tables in Mary's restaurant were big and circular, all with another, slightly smaller, circular board connected to the top. This installation could be turned and thus gave everyone around the table easy access to all the food. *Nyonya* food is served steaming hot and in contrast to pure Chinese food it is eaten with fork and spoon (or just hands) instead of chopsticks as this is more convenient for eating rice and curry (*sambal*). While the two qualities "blandness" and "freshness" (Chua & Raja 2001:172) are emphasized in "pure" Chinese cuisines *peranakan* food is distinctively different. It is generally hot and spicy and a lot of locally grown spices and raw ingredients are included such as tamarind, turmeric, chilli, curry as well as lemongrass, shrimp paste (*belacan*) and coconut milk.

Nyonya food as a hybrid Chinese cuisine

The cultural transformation involved when constructing a new cuisine like *peranakan* food can also be described through the term *hybridization*. This term is accounted for in Ulf Hannerz's well-known essay "*The world in Creolisation*" where he states that cultures cannot be perceived as stable or coherent, but have to be studied as a "work in progress"

(Hannerz 1987:550). Another word for this “work in progress” is hybridization which in Hannerz’s view is a process that constantly produces new mixtures of local culture which move around in global space and are recreated by new influences over and over again. Hybridization can also be said to involve a mix or a fusion of different cultural elements where the outcome is a distinctive *new form* (Young 1995:25). All this talk about hybridity nevertheless presupposes an idea of “pure” or authentic types assumed to be involved in the mixing and blending. “Pure” and hybrid types are in other words often seen as *bipolar oppositions*, to use Levi-Strauss’ term (1966). These cultural types, however, only exist in the minds and classification system of the social actors who define them and are therefore what we can call cultural constructs.

When discussing *nyonya* food and hybridization it is important to be aware that although this cuisine is popularly known as a ‘unique blend’ of two ethnic cuisines, such blend is not evident in each and every dish.⁵ Hybridity is not just about mixing different cultural elements, but like Chua and Raja (2001:175) point out more “a matter of reconstituting, in part and in whole.” In line with this, absence of ingredients can also be regarded as a form of hybridization like the absence of pork in Chinese *halal* food (see chapter four). The same goes for hawker cuisine. Although ingredients are borrowed across ethnic lines (see chilli example below), this does not mean that *any* food item found popular by the Chinese is necessarily incorporated into the Chinese cuisine. *Roti canai* and *teh tarik* are examples of the opposite. These dishes are enjoyed by all the ethnic groups and most Chinese on the island eat them regularly. In spite of this they are however not added to the menu of Chinese hawkers or restaurants but remain confined to the Indian *nasi kandar* restaurants.

Chua and Raja (2001:167) nevertheless argue that most of the population in Malaysia fail to recognize the fact that their food has been moulded by time and environment. Instead they continue to understand the various ethnic cuisines as “pure” types. This misconception was something I encountered in Penang when one of the most famous *nasi kandar* chains on the island, Pelita, expanded its business and set up the first *nasi kandar* restaurant in the South Indian city, Chennai. This was regarded “pure” Indian food in Penang, but sadly rumour had it that its assumed “authentic Indian flavour” was far from a success in its “original motherland.” Apparently *nasi kandar* food did not suit the Indian taste and was not regarded

⁵ In fact some of the most common Nyonya dishes show little or no Malay influences (Tan 2001:135)

“proper Indian food” by the natives. This was most likely due to the number of Chinese and Malay elements which had been adapted throughout the years in the Malaysian setting, a fact more or less ignored by the local Penangites. *Nyonya* food, on the other hand, was not conceived of as “pure,” on the contrary being a fusion cuisine was its most famous trademark. The fact that it was recognized as hybrid food did not prevent it from being identified as *ethnic* though. In this regard the significant feature of *peranakan* food is that it resonates exclusively on ethnic Chineseness. In spite of the mix of cultural elements the cuisine remains Chinese in essence⁶ and in line with this it seems appropriate to quote Susan Kalcik (1984:56) who writes:

“The authenticity of recipes and other foodways is not as important as the fact of making what is a recognizable ethnic dish. Practitioners of ethnic cookery have developed substitutes, or significant modifications, which are acceptable because the use of the food so present is symbolic. Therefore one does not have to be authentic to be ethnic”.

Nyonya food, like the one served in Mary’s restaurant, is in other words a cultural mix expressing the hybrid *peranakan* identity. To be *peranakan* is not seen as an ethnic identity in itself, but more as a Chinese sub-group. Therefore *peranakan* cuisine is, in its wider sense, a marker for Chinese identity despite the numerous Malay elements. The Chinese identity expressed is however unique and localized, it is a Chinese *Malaysian* identity (Tan 2001:138).

Betwixt and between China and Malaysia

The promotion of national unity, or “unity in diversity” as the slogan went, was popular in conjunction with the upcoming *merdeka* celebration and was a topic discussed by people in all strands of society. The newspapers had headlines like “Malaysia, a case study in unity”, “Everyone has a part to play in nation-building”, or “This country belongs to all Malaysians” and a series of columns where Malaysians born in 1957 described the country’s development and expressed their deep love for the nation were published on a daily basis.

⁶ One of the reasons for that being that it is non-halal and contains pork.

As the purpose of this thesis is to link ethnicity and nationalism to food, an interesting question is how attachment to the Malaysian nation-state can be understood through the manifestation of different dishes and cuisines on the island. As we have seen food can be a marker of ethnic identity, but below I will also argue that it can be a statement about nationhood. The relation between food and nationalism is not alien in anthropology and has been explored by a number of scholars like Appadurai (1988), Caglar (1995), Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), to mention a few. However, before bringing in the aspect of food I would like to outline some of the most striking features of the transnational situation of the overseas Chinese in Malaysia and Penang.

In chapter three I established that citizenship and nationhood are two different things and that the Chinese, due to the religious and political conditions in the country, feel less accepted because of their ethnicity. The focus on national unity can therefore, in this context, be understood as a wishful political rhetoric rather than an account of the actual feelings many Chinese Malaysians have towards the government and, as an extension, the nation-state. Like Émilie once said: *“It is all a hoax! They want to display this image of unity and harmony, but that reality exists only on the surface.”* In her opinion unity could not be achieved before all citizens had equal rights and as long as the *Bumiputeras* were favoured, reinforced by the fact that they were seen as “true” Malaysians, the Chinese would continue to be viewed, and view themselves, as Chinese first and Malaysian second.

The relationship between being Malaysian by citizenship and Chinese by ethnicity is not simple. On one hand my Chinese informants wished for equal rights and to be seen as Malaysians rather than Chinese, but on the other they seemed to cling to their Chinese heritage and were proud to be *“more Chinese than the Chinese in China”*. Eriksen (1993:62) proposes to call such groups ‘ethnic anomalies’ as they can be considered ‘neither or’ or ‘both and’. They are Malaysian citizens, yet at the same time have various levels of attachment to the Chinese nation-state. In a sense they are “betwixt and between” Malaysia and China and this dilemma is also a part of what makes national attachment and inclusion in the Malaysian nation-state problematic from both a Chinese and a Malay viewpoint. To understand this situation it is therefore necessary to take the transnational network the Chinese community in Penang is a part of into consideration.

Although many of the Chinese I met had never been to China there was a connection, if nothing else, through their Chinese name and clan attachment. Tom, my landlord, once

explained to me how important it was to protect your Chinese name. This was his ultimate link to China as it enabled him to trace his ancestor line back to his place of origin on the Mainland. According to Tom this was something that most Chinese in Penang were able to do and the focus on giving birth to boys was therefore due to a wish of keeping the family name and the continuity with their ancestor country alive. This was also one of the reasons why the Chinese community generally frowned upon Chinese converts to Islam. Becoming a Muslim required a Muslim name and giving up the ancestor name was by many seen as a serious “loss of Chineseness.” Religion constituted another part of the transnational network. Su Yin, my friend from USM, maintained a connection with her country of origin through her Buddhist faith. The temple she belonged to was frequently visited by Buddhist monks from China and Taiwan and the members regularly travelled to different Chinese regions in order to maintain the religious bonds with other Buddhist associations, be religiously inspired and buy new items (Buddha statues and the like) for the temple in Georgetown. Last but not least, the economical relationship with China was significant among my informants. As an example Lim’s family ran a business selling imported goods in a shop house next to the harbour. Everything they sold was brought from China and as they had no storage space in the shop, their house was filled with piles and piles of boxes stuffed with anything from Chinese toys to traditional herbal medicine. Maintaining this business doubtlessly required business connections, frequent travels overseas, and maybe even a trade network in Mainland China.

This free flow of Chinese Malaysian capital and people between Malaysia and China might be seen as something that serves to interrupt the political borders of the nation, both from a Chinese and a Malaysian viewpoint (Ong 1997:175). The Malaysian government fears that the national economy will suffer as a result of local Chinese Malaysian investment overseas. They also worry that the increasingly economically powerful China will gain more political power in the region, and thus serve to weaken their independent nation state (Ong 1997:177). Like Clifford (1997:269) so elegantly put it: “The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling here assumes solidarity there” When writing about diaspora Clifford (1997:247) refers to William Safran’s (1991) definition which states that it is an expatriate minority community located in at least two “peripheral” places away from the original homeland. Such groups usually maintain a common myth about their place of origin and feel alienated in their host country. They have a desire to return to their homeland and shape their group identity in relation to the close attachment they have to their ancestor country (Clifford

1997:248). It is true that the Chinese in Penang tick many of these “boxes”, but they also depart from this model (which is based on the Jewish prototype) in some respects. Most importantly they do not, in my experience, have a desire to return to China, not even on a utopian level. The assumed solidarity *there* is probably nevertheless what generates suspicion from the Malaysian government, and the question whether the Chinese can be trusted as truly loyal citizens has therefore been an ongoing debate within the Malaysian nation-state.

Aiwah Ong (1993:771-772) writes that the Chinese in “diasporas” have a sort of *flexible citizenship* and argues that they feel minimally obliged to identify with the nation-state they live in because the local context is seen as irrelevant to their cultural and political identity. According to Ong the Chinese are more localised in relation to family, than to country. They are in a flexible position between two nation-states and although they want to be regarded as fully-fledged citizens of Malaysia they continue to feel culturally attached to their ancestor country (Ong 1993: 751,770-771). I will however argue that in spite of these transnational bonds the Chinese in Penang do, to some extent, identify with the Malaysian nation-state, yet on their own terms. Following Ong’s argument about family attachment it can also be said that most Chinese in Penang have lived there for generations, and Malaysia, in contrast to China, is therefore first and foremost where family is. From what my informants conveyed to me their situation is in other words not so much about place and return, but more about recreating a culture and identity in a new locality. The concept of diaspora, as it is defined by Safran, might therefore be seen as rather irrelevant in this context, at least from a Chinese point of view. The reason for bringing it up is nevertheless that the Malaysian government, in spite of the multicultural “unity in diversity” rhetoric, still seems to deal with the Chinese (and Indians) as if they did fall into this category. The Chinese are for example, like most diasporic communities, defined in opposition to the nation-state and the indigenous population through terms like *Bumiputera*. They are ultimately seen as a group which are “not-here-to-stay,” and it is feared that their loyalty lies elsewhere. This view was maybe most clearly put into words by the former Prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir (1970: 132), in the highly controversial book *The Malay Dilemma*:

“(…) the fact remains that should a Malay or Indian be forced to leave Malaya, the Indian can settle down in India whilst the Malay cannot. Similarly the Chinese, whatever he himself may think, is still acceptable to China should he find the need to go back”

By this Mahathir is implying that no matter how Malaysian a Chinese feel he (or she) can never be fully trusted as he could turn his back on the country at any time. This mistrust is hard to swallow for many Chinese Malaysians who persistently view themselves as Malaysians no matter how close connections they may have with Mainland China. It was hurtful to know that the government questioned their loyalty to the nation and as a consequence I noticed that my Chinese informants were extremely sensitive when it came to situations where their nationality was brought up. Once I witnessed, Henry, a Chinese businessman, being asked by a Malay clerk in a public office to *prove* (by showing his identity card) that he was really a Malaysian. This was an incident that affected him tremendously and he was upset for hours afterwards. In Henry's opinion the Malay clerk should have known by his appearance and accent that he was a Malaysian and he was 100% sure that no Malay would be treated in a similar fashion. According to my informants there wasn't necessarily a contradiction between being Chinese by ethnicity and Malaysian by nationality. Like Jess, Christopher's friend once said: "*I'm a Chinese, but I don't identify with China, I'm a Malaysian!*" I believe what she meant was that she felt at home in Malaysia among Malaysians which she viewed as *her people* regardless of race. This view was shared by most of my informants in spite of the bitterness directed towards the government policies and the Islamic religion. An example is from a night out with Émilie and her Indian friend, Sathir in KL. They took me to some of the most popular nightclubs in town and explained that they preferred to frequent places with a balanced mix of Chinese, Indians and Malays. According to them clubs where the clientele was purely Chinese or Indian were boring and they stressed that they enjoyed the unique ethnic mix their country had to offer. To live in China was therefore totally out of the question and Émilie explained that there was a stark division between Malaysian Chinese and what she called the "PRC-people" (Chinese from The Peoples Republic of China). The "PRC-people" were stereotyped as rude, loud talking and a generally arrogant people⁷ who would come to Malaysia as tourists and do impudent things like spitting and the like in public. Émilie emphasised that Chinese Malaysians would distance themselves from being identified with this kind of behaviour which according to her was regarded as very un-Malaysian.

⁷ Ironically this characteristics seem to fit quite well with the one Malays commonly used on the Chinese Malaysians. They described them as *kasan* meaning harsh, rough and disagreeable. The Malay temperament was on the contrary seen as *halus*, meaning delicate or tactful.

During my trip to KL I witnessed an episode where this stark differentiation was activated. As mentioned in chapter four, I visited the State Mosque together with Emilie and her father, but inside the Mosque we were addressed by a Malay man who turned out to be what Emilie's father called a "little napoleons". "Little napoleons" were people, usually Malays, who misused their power or tried to create divisions and conflict over ethnic or religious matters. This guy was of the latter sort and he gave us quite a lesson on how to behave in the Mosque. It was obvious that if it had been up to him we wouldn't have been allowed to enter at all, something which confirmed Emilie's and her father's suspicion of not being welcome. Although we were assured by the staff afterwards that this was not the official opinion of the Mosque and that "the little napoleon's" view should be totally disregarded, Emilie and her father felt offended and it took them a while to shake off the incident. After about half an hour into our visit both Emilie and I had to use the toilet and as it turned out that we were not allowed to use the one in the Mosque (which of course was a new source of irritation) we went to the public toilet just down the street and waited in line behind two Chinese ladies who chatted energetically with each other in Mandarin. Strictly speaking we arrived first but somehow, to Emilie's big annoyance, these ladies had managed to squeeze in ahead of us. Afterwards Emilie told us that from what she had understood of their conversation they were talking badly about the toilet guard, a polite Indian lady. They were obviously "PRC-people" Emilie said furiously, and unfortunately this kind of rude and arrogant behaviour could therefore be expected. Our visit to the Mosque had in other words left us with two uncomfortable experiences which each had served to activate important ethnic and national distinctions, between the Chinese and the Malays and between the Chinese Malaysians and the "PRC-people." Social identities are relative and situational and as this example shows the category *we* change according to the situation and the persons involved (Eriksen 1993:30). In the first encounter Emilie and her father stressed their Chineseness, while in the other it was undercommunicated and they chose to emphasise their localised identity as Malaysians instead. To my surprise Emilie stated later that day that what had pissed her off the most was doubtlessly the incident with the "PRC-ladies", their lack of manners was just unforgivable.

A nation of "durian-lovers": Using food to negotiate for a unique national identity

As seen the Chinese in Penang maintain various economical, religious and ideological bonds with Mainland China and this is a situation that puts them in an ambiguous position between

two nation-states. Traditional food is also a way for them to uphold a sense of continuity with their ethnic roots, and in that sense a part of their transnational bond to their ancestor country. However Chinese food in Malaysia and Penang can also be a statement about nationhood. It can be a channel through which the Chinese can negotiate for a Malaysian identity on their own terms. Like Eriksen (1993:3, 31) points out identities are never given once and for all, but are always negotiated and manipulated by the agents themselves.

Lee's book *Malaysian flavours* (2004) can be regarded as an attempt of such identity negotiation. It is supposed to be an "insight into things Malaysian" and on the front cover it is stated that: "If you need a book that captures the essence of what it is to be Malaysian, this is it." In reality however it is not so much about being Malaysian as it is about being Chinese Malaysian. It is written by a *nyonya* Chinese for Chinese readers and throughout the whole book the Chinese contribution to the Malaysian culture is emphasised as well as certain aspects Lee believe *all* Malaysians have in common; reckless driving, Manglish (Malaysian English) and last but not least, the love for Malaysian food. The title *Malaysian flavours* refers to the multicultural population and how they all add different "flavours", through food and other cultural attributes, to the nation. This book could probably not have been written by a Malay, simply because the Malays don't really have the same need for it. Their position in the country is well established and they regard themselves (and are regarded by others) as an inevitable part of Malaysia's population. The Chinese Malaysians on the other hand, live under conditions that call for a deeper reflection on what it actually means to be a Malaysian. They are not a taken-for-granted part of the country's population and are therefore forced to take the matter into their own hands in an attempt to define their position. *Malaysian Flavours* is a book that tries to do just that. Ultimately it is about what makes the Chinese in Malaysia *Malaysians* and how they identify with what they see as *their* country. It is also about how the Malaysian Chinese have created a unique national identity, an identity that clearly differentiates them from both the "PRC-people" and the Muslim Malays.

Like I've shown earlier food in Penang is closely linked to collective identity formation and social interaction on the public arena, as it is a "language" everyone on the island understands and "speaks" fluently. Food has a central position in the formation of the Chinese community and ethnic boundaries are also manifested through various ingredients and eating practices. Therefore it is not surprising that food can be a forceful symbol to the Chinese in the attempt to create their own unique *niche* in the Malaysian nation. Eating *nyonya* food including curry dishes can be seen as a way for the Chinese to project their

local national identity in contrast to what they call the “PRC-people.” *Nyonya* food is said to be a mix of Malay and Chinese ingredients, but although this cuisine was invented in Malaysia, it is not the Chinese food that has been appropriated by Malays, but the other way around (Chua & Raja 2001:176). This can be said about the other cultural element in the *peranakan* tradition as well, but as a result of its origin and unique presences in the country *nyonya* food, dress and architecture have nevertheless become an accepted part of the Malaysian national heritage.⁸ However, as mentioned, the presence of pork in *nyonya* food makes it exclusivist in that it rules out Malays and other Muslims. The fact that the Chinese choose not to give up this element can be an indicator of a silent resistance against assimilation. They want to be a part of the Malaysian population, but on their own terms.

Like *nyonya* food and curry dishes, eating local fruits like durian, can also reflect a localised Chinese identity. Durian, or the “the king of fruit,” as it is commonly known throughout Southeast Asia, is a popular snack among all Penangites. Durian is however not easy to take an immediate liking to as the distinctive rotten smell is enough to put even the boldest off. In Penang this big, green and thorny fruit is grown in the *Balik Pulau* area and the local durian is considered to be of world class. Dedicated durian lovers sometimes eat the yellow durian-flesh for lunch or dinner with rice and the streets of Georgetown are therefore filled with its rather abominable smell on a regular basis. My Chinese informants constantly urged me to try it out and told me that although I probably wouldn’t like it at first I should not give it up. One of the special qualities of durian was that it got better by each taste, and they were convinced that I would eventually find it just as delicious as they did. Seen in relation to this learning to eat durian can symbolize the process of adapting to life in Southeast Asia, while refusing to eat it might indicate a rejection of the local culture. All the different ethnic groups enjoyed this fruit and although they did not expect newcomers like me, or Chinese visitors from China, to be equally enthusiastic about it they were very pleased if we at least gave it a try. After all, Malaysia was described as “*a nation of durian eaters*” as the fruit was impossible to avoid if staying in the country for even a short period of time. It was hard to remain neutral towards it as it had a taste, smell and texture one either loved or hated. Still it seemed like this locally grown speciality *was neutral* and inclusive in the sense that it was

⁸ Especially when Malaysian culture is promoted to foreign tourists. In this context the *peranakan* culture is put forward as one of the characteristics that make Malaysia a unique and exotic country. The *nyonya* dress, *kebaya*, is particularly popular as a national symbol and is for example used by the flight attendants on Air Malaysia.

not charged with ethnicity of any kind, but was rather seen as something typical *Malaysian*. When the Chinese immigrants settled in Penang they therefore went through a process of becoming durian eaters, and the love for “the king of fruit” have thus become yet another symbol of their localised identity (Tan 2001:153).

The multicultural environment in Penang has not only resulted in new fusion cuisines through innovation it has also generated an extensive borrowing between the different ethnic food traditions. The use of chilli in Chinese dishes would for example be alien to Chinese consumers in Mainland China, but in Penang raw chopped chilli in dark soy sauce is a natural part of any Chinese hawker dish (especially if it contains noodles which can be regarded the hokkien staple food). Chua and Raja (2001:176) refer to this use of Chilli as a “gastronomic index” and writes:

“If the different kinds of chilli sauces, dips and accompaniments are indexical of the different kind of noodle and other dishes consumed by Chinese Singaporeans and Malaysians, the general all-consuming need and desire for the gastronomic pleasures of chillies are an index of their differentiation from other ethnic Chinese and, indeed, Chinese in China (...)”

The Chinese Malaysian craving for chillies is described by Lee (2004) who uses a trip with some friends to Italy as an example. After a few days of Italian food they were all desperate for something spicy and fresh chillies were definitely on top of the list of wants. Each time they entered a Chinese restaurant they would plead with the waiter “please, please, can we have some red chillies?” But the reply was always the same “Sorry we do not serve those”, and they were told that since this was a *Chinese* restaurant none of the dishes came with fresh chillies. (Lee 2004:174-175).

Overall the taste for spicy ingredients and locally grown fruits, herbs and vegetables is a part of what distinguishes the Chinese Malaysians from the Chinese in China (Tan 2001:141). Food is in other words not only used by the Chinese to set themselves apart from the Malays and other ethnic communities (chapter three and four), they also use it to incorporate themselves as Malaysians.

Conclusion

Continuity and transformation must always be present in the study of foodways.

Gastronomic culture (like all culture) is never static, but dynamic, or as Hannerz (1987) put it a “work in progress.” The Chinese brought with them a distinctive cuisine combined with certain ideas of cooking and eating from their homeland. This cuisine and the ideas attached have persisted, but they have also been influenced by the local culture and environment of Penang. As a result some dishes have been modified, ingredients have been borrowed and whole cuisines have been appropriated in order to construct fusion cuisines like *nyonya* food.

Chinese Malaysian food in Penang today mirrors both historical continuity, the political and religious conditions in the country, and last but not least a localised identity negotiated and manipulated by the Chinese through generations of interaction with Malays, Indians and others in Penang. In line with this David Y.H Wu (2002:91) argues that “authentic material culture, such as traditional dishes, exist only in the mind of ideas or ideals”. In other words there is no such thing as “pure” cuisines implying that ethnic or national dishes are just as imagined as communities are (Chua & Raja 2002:189).⁹ Ethnicity and nationality are not absolute identities given by nature even though they are made to appear that way. They are not in our blood and are not a biological feature given by birth. Ethnicity and nationalism are on the other hand identifications constructed and created through social and cultural interaction and negotiation (Bauman 1999:21,137). It is something intrinsic to people’s everyday life and actions and in the context of Penang, very much related to food and eating.

⁹ Referring back to Andersons (1991) famous interpretation of nation-states as “imagined communities”.

Concluding Remarks

When I first came to Penang, and met my informants, I found it kind of odd, and even a bit annoying at times, that they seemed more interested in eating and talking about food than in discussing topics related to their minority situation and the political and religious conditions in the country. In the process of writing this thesis, however, I have come to the realization that they *were* trying to answer my questions, yet not in the manner I had anticipated.

Introducing me to their culinary universe was, as I see it now, done in an attempt to make their social reality comprehensible, and eventually it enabled me to grasp patterns that could not be articulated in direct speech. Food was used by my informants to communicate *who they were* to each other, opposing groups, and last but not least, to outsiders like me. The numerous and varied meals consumed in their company therefore eventually provided me with stories of resistance, ambiguity, visible ethnic boundaries and, last but not least, innovative cuisines and dynamic identity negotiation.

This thesis is built on an analysis of these stories. To recapitulate I have argued that ethnic dishes, eating practices and commensality represent a part of my informants transnational bonds to China. Food incorporates the Chinese in a moral community and help to unify the different sub-divisions from within. Inclusion and exclusion are, however, two sides of the same coin and when some members are included in the community it is therefore necessary to exclude others (Kalcik 1984:48). “Pure” *non-halal* Chinese food and the traditional use of

it (in rituals etc.) therefore also serves to differentiate the Chinese moral community from other moral communities on the island. In particular the single ingredient pork can be seen an ethnic marker which serve to highlight the different moral value systems of the Chinese and the Malays. I have argued that from a Chinese viewpoint these conflicting foodways also reflect the wider social, political and ethnic conditions in the country as well as their ambiguous minority situation. The Malaysian national ideology is based on principles of culture, race, language, religion and territory and the Chinese Malaysians are therefore defined as outsiders. They are Malaysian citizens but lack the defining incorporating features needed to legitimate their national belonging and identity within such a racial and indigenous state.

To further illustrate this in-between situation I would like to quote a letter written by a Chinese boy named Jason Lim. During my fieldwork in 2007 The Star Newspaper had a daily column encouraging young Malaysians to write short stories about what *merdeka* mean to them and how they believed growing up in the country had moulded them as persons. Jason's story was one of the first that got published (25.06.2007) and I got particularly caught up by the following paragraph as it in my experience sums up some of the essence of what it means to be Chinese in Malaysia today:

“I'm a Chinese Malaysian three generations away from a China I never want to call home (...) When young people learn about themselves, as I am doing now, they should find themselves opening realms of possibilities, but like other Malaysian-Chinese youth, I am forced to face my limitations instead. Limitations such as to what extent I can voice my opinion, behave with my loved ones in public and succeed in my career path. And I do realise that I will never be the Prime Minister. To call this beautiful country my home, I put up with these limitations. I read somewhere that love grows from understanding, but love itself cannot be understood. And so, I won't seek to understand my love for this country which would not even notice if I were to give up one day and leave. I won't seek to understand why she is mine even though I will never truly be hers”

Jason is here referring to the fact that the governments policies and national ideology defines him as an outsider and in a way attempts to ascribe him with a “Chinese first and Malaysian second” identity. Neither foodways nor identities are fixed or static entities though. On the

contrary they are social constructions emerging from dynamic processes of borrowing, reinvention and negotiation. In order to be accepted as Malaysians on their own terms the Chinese Malaysians therefore have to come up with alternative solutions to their ethnic and national identity dilemma.

I have argued that the widespread Chinese appropriation of local ingredients, love for fruits, spices, herbs and vegetables grown on Penang soil, can symbolise the construction of a “new” localised Chinese identity. If nothing else, it represents a material manifestation of the distance, both in time and space, between the Chinese Malaysians and the “PRC-people” in Mainland China. Identity, like ethnic cuisine, is therefore more about ‘doing’ than ‘being’ and I will argue, inspired by Fagerlid (2005:161), that being described as a second, third or tenth generation Chinese immigrant in Malaysia, does not necessarily imply a set of conflicting attachments. The label *Chinese Malaysians* therefore wrongly suggest a dual national identity causing mutual distrust between the immigrant communities and the “indigenous” population in the country. From what my Chinese informants conveyed to me they did not see their national identity as divided into two conflicting components. Instead they negotiated for their very own niche in the Malaysian nation-state, and the liberty to reconstruct their Chinese identity in the “new” locality on their own terms.

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Appendix

Abbreviations

KL = Kuala Lumpur

NEP = New Economic Policy

PCG = Penang Charity Group

PHM = Penang Handicraft Market

PRC = Peoples Republic of China

USM = Universiti Sains Malaysia

List of dishes

Banana leaf rice: White rice served on banana leaf with assortment of vegetables and curry-meat to choose from.

Char kway teow: Stir-fried (*char*) flat rice noodles (*kway teow*) with prawns, cockles, bean sprouts, Chinese chives and eggs.

Curry mee: Noodles with spicy coconut milk based gravy, garnished with bean sprouts, prawns, cockles, bean curd puffs, fishballs and cuttlefish (and sometimes coagulated pigs' blood)

Hokkien mee: Chinese noodle soup with orange-red prawn stock topped with slices of lean pork, prawns, hard boiled egg and fried shallot crisps.

Lohr bak: Chinese fried pork sausage.

Mee goreng: Fried wheat-based noodles (*mee*), dry and spicy with potatoes, bean curd, squid and egg (usually sold in *nasi kandar* restaurants).

Mee rebus: Fried wheat-based noodles (*mee*) in thick spicy tomato gravy with potato's, bean curd and egg (usually sold in *nasi kanar* restaurants).

Mutton bryani: Rice cooked with spices, pieces of mutton (or chicken) and 'ghee'. Often accompanied by a choice of curry dishes (Indian).

Nasi Kandar food: The term originally referred to Indian Muslim vendors who in earlier times carried around their delicious curries and rice on their shoulders balanced on each end of a pole. The Malay word for rice is *nasi* and the pole was called *kandar*. As the name suggests the basis for *nasi kandar* food is steamed rice with various accompanying curry dishes

Nyonya Food: Fusion cuisine with a mix of Chinese and Malay ingredients and cooking principles. It is generally hot and spicy and a lot of locally grown spices and raw ingredients are included such as tamarind, turmeric, chilli, curry as well as lemongrass, shrimp paste (*belacan*) and coconut milk.

Penang asam laksa: Rice noodles in hot and sour, fish-based gravy topped with lots of aromatic herbs such as torch ginger flower and lemongrass (*nyonya* origin)

Popiah: Special raw springroll with lettuce (*nyonya* origin).

Rojak: Fruit and vegetable salad composed of cucumber, yambean and pineapples tossed in a spicy prawn paste and topped with ground peanuts.

Roti canai: Crispy Indian pancake sold at *nasi kandar* stalls

Teh tarik: Sweet Indian tea with milk sold at *nasi kandar* stalls

Tim sum: Many variations of small steamed dumplings with pork or prawn fillings (Cantonese).

List of photos

- Front page: Chinese lion dance in shopping mall in conjunction with Chinese New Year. It was common to start the “new business year” this way as it was believed to bring luck and prosperity to the owners and employees. In the background a Malay lady in *tudong* watching the show, February 2007.
- Page 17: A typical street in Penang with the colonial buildings in the front and the landmark Komtar in the background, June 2007.
- Page 28: Hawker scene in MacAllister road, June 2007.
- Page 58: Hokkien New Year at the Chew Jetty and in the entrance of private home, February 2007.

