



**INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES, SINGAPORE**

**THE AMBIGUITY OF IDENTITY**  
**Ethnicity Maintenance and Change Among**  
**The Straits Chinese Community**  
**of Malaysia and Singapore**

**John R. Clammer**

**Occasional Paper No. 54**  
**1979**



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**PUSTAKA PERDANA**



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## Abstract

The Straits Chinese (otherwise known as Babas or Peranakans) provide material for an especially interesting case study of ethnic identity and change. They are a group of long standing in Malaysia and Singapore, and represent a unique blend of Chinese and Malay cultural traits, yet are quite distinct from either of these two source cultures. Many Straits Chinese rose to positions of political and social prominence in what was previously the colony of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang and Malacca) and in other parts of Malaya. The nature of this cultural and political accommodation and its dynamics provide an ideal ethnographic base for an exploration of ethnicity in Southeast Asia.

Accordingly, this paper is an exploration of ethnic group maintenance and change among the members of this community. It examines the nature of Straits Chinese identity and culture, the changes in the nature of the group, and both internal and external criteria for identification. This provides a basis for an examination of selected processes of ethnic group formation and change in Malaysia and Singapore. Additionally, the paper attempts to initiate discussion on the principles underlying ethnicity and the possibilities of and barriers to ethnic assimilation in the two countries.

The essential thesis of the paper is that the emergence of the Baba community is to be explained by a combination of social factors (the existence of an ethnically Chinese population, culturally isolated in a Malayan social environment) and political ones (the existence of the British colonial régime and its nurturing of a group who were willing to distinguish themselves from other Chinese migrants by learning English and entering the colonial service, thus acting as social and political brokers between the government and the non-English speaking Chinese, and as mediators between the Chinese and the Malays, as the Babas' first language was normally Malay). With the decline of British influence after 1942, the political preeminence of the Babas was eroded, and with the coming of independence in the two countries, their position has become highly ambiguous. By descent Chinese, by culture Sino-Malay and by political allegiance British, their position is very uncertain. Some predict the total collapse of their culture; other see themselves as the uniquely Malaysian/Singaporean culture and

and as a model for other ethnic groups to follow in adopting a cultural synthesis from the diversity of local cultures. The paper argues, however, that the outcome of this situation is not to be explained by factors of choice or perception, but by structural factors which have their roots both in the colonial past of the area, and in the present management of ethnicity in the two countries under consideration. The paper, therefore, concludes with an examination of these factors, including processes of accommodation, assimilation and resinification.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to use an ethnographic case study to pose a theoretical question -- what is "ethnicity" and how is it managed, maintained and changed? The case study chosen for this purpose is that of the Straits Chinese community of Malaysia and Singapore. Throughout the paper, the terms "Straits Chinese", "Babas" and "Peranakans" are used as synonyms. The choice of this particular community is dictated by two factors -- one being simply that it represents a group which has been the subject of intensive investigation by the present author; and the other, being the more significant fact that the study of this community raises some important and interesting issues about the nature of ethnicity, especially as it is defined and as it operates in a Southeast Asian context.

This is seen to be true when one tries to define the boundaries of the ethnographic unit by asking "Who is a Baba"? Conventional wisdom does not regard this as a problem -- a Baba is simply a person who fulfils or conforms to a set of formal criteria -- notably that he or she should (a) identify him/her self as a Baba; (b) have a strong preference for the distinctively Straits Chinese cuisine; (c) speak, or belong to a family of which some members speak, "Baba Malay", the Straits Chinese *patois* or Creole language, and (d) belong to a family in which at least one of the female members wears the Nonya costume of *sarong kebaya*, preferably with the slippers and jewellery associated with Peranakan women.<sup>1</sup>

A Straits Chinese, in other words, is an individual who fulfils these conditions, plus one or two others -- he or she is normally of Chinese descent, but is "Straits born", that is, born and reared in what was originally the Straits Settlements (Malacca, Penang and Singapore) and who possesses few ties with China. He or she is regarded as the possessor of a syncretic culture, partly Chinese and partly Malay in its inspiration. And today opinion is divided as to whether this culture is dying or reviving, largely because of uncertainty as to exactly what constitutes Baba identity and because of equal uncertainty about the criteria of change. In particular, there is one outstandingly interesting aspect of this: before the war (1942-45) many people regarded Baba culture as the uniquely Malayan culture, entirely indigenous in its cultural synthesis. It was

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1 For example, Rosie Tan Kim Neo, "The Straits Chinese of Singapore," Dip. Soc. Sci. Dissertation, University of Singapore, 1958, cited by Png Poh Seng in "The Straits Chinese in Singapore: A Case of Local Identity and Socio-Cultural Accommodation," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 10, 1969, p. 99.

not to be found elsewhere in the world, with the possible exception of Java where a parallel and very similar example exists. Yet, after the war and with the onset of independence, first in Malaya and latterly in Singapore, the culture appears to have gone into decline. But is this actually a decline, or is it in fact an altogether different process, that of either assimilation or integration into the wider society? If so, what is the nature of this assimilative process? And to whom are the Babas becoming assimilated? Why, in Malaysia in particular, are they not becoming more closely associated with the Malays? In order to answer these questions we have to examine both the historical and structural factors conditioning Straits Chinese society.

### The Historical Dimensions of Peranakan Ethnicity

It is widely asserted<sup>2</sup> that Straits Chinese culture and society, and in particular its synthesis of Chinese and Malay elements, originated from intermarriages between Chinese males, traders by profession, who settled in Malacca from the fifteenth century A.D. onwards, and local Malay women. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> there is little evidence for this belief. It is, of course, true that there has been a Chinese colony in Malacca for centuries. When Cheng Ho, the famous Ming Dynasty "admiral" arrived in Malacca in 1408, he found a small Chinese community already well established there. Subsequent accounts of the Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, Malay and finally British, reveal the continuing existence of this community which survived the changing political and economic fortunes of Malacca up until the establishment of the Straits Settlements in 1826. From that date onwards, Chinese in fact migrated from Malacca, principally to Singapore, but also in some numbers into the Malay States. (Penang interestingly enough appears to have developed, quite independently of Malacca, its own Peranakan culture which, to this day, retains its distinctive qualities.)

There is no evidence during this long period of time (early fifteenth to early nineteenth centuries) of the appearance of a Peranakan culture in Malaysia,

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2 For example, by V. Purcell in *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 37-38 and by Png, 1969, p. 95.

3 J.R. Clammer, "The Straits Chinese," in K.S. Sandhu and Paul Wheatley, eds., *The Changing Role and Status of Malacca* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979).

and this is corroborated by contemporary anthropological data, in particular, the facts that, first, very few contemporary Malacca Baba families have any record of ethnic intermarriage. Marriage was either intracommunal or new spouses were acquired from among migrants from China. In fact, a fairly strict form of ethnic segregation was practised in Malacca, the different groups having their own areas in the city, and possessing quite separate administrative structures under their successive foreign rulers.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, Peranakan lineages are usually very shallow and rarely extend beyond the early or mid nineteenth century. Thirdly, an analysis of the gravestones in the great Chinese cemetery of Bukit Cina in Malacca revealed that few burial sites went back to earlier than the eighteenth century, and that the great majority of the lineages there represented are either not Peranakan ones if they have continued to this day, or have died out. Fourthly, it is often argued that the Babas must have married Malay women, because of the serious imbalance in the sex ratio of the Chinese population in the Straits Settlements (eight males to one female in 1823 on the eve of official incorporation as a colony; eleven to one in 1850).

Yet the sex ratio among the Babas seems always to have been more normal, and the explanation for this appears to have been that the Babas, as a group which rapidly became a numerical minority as migration from China increased, were able to control the balance essentially through the factor of prestige. Considerable status (and indeed security) was gained by a *Sinkheh* (literally, new guest) who was able to marry into the Straits Chinese community, which however exercised strict control over the marriages of its valuable and (statistically speaking) rare daughters. Access to marriageable women was thus regulated, and normally only established non-Straits Chinese were acceptable. By the time they were well established, they were often partly Peranakanized anyway. For Baba men, the problem was less pressing -- they either married within their own fairly balanced community or married Chinese girls (usually Hokkiens or Teochews) who were assimilated into Peranakan society as a consequence of the well known Chinese principle of mother-in-law rule, even within an officially patriarchal system. This also explains a feature of Peranakan society which long puzzled me -- the high incidence of matrilocal marriage and of female heads of households.

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4 See, for example, Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, *The Hikayat Abdullah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 64.

Structurally, this seems odd in a Chinese kinship system, but viewed historically it makes good sense. Females were the valuable items in Baba society and were accordingly given a higher status than they would have otherwise had. The in-marrying male was thus, in terms of the continuity of Baba society, less important and could easily be replaced. The mother or daughter, under these conditions, naturally gravitated to a position of authority, and this feature has gradually become institutionalized. Again, this has been explained as a result of contact with Malay society; but this is rather far fetched. Certainly some Peranakans would be familiar with the Minangkabau matrilineal system which penetrates into the northern part of Malacca state in the region of Alor Gadjah but why they should adopt this system by borrowing is unclear. I think that the explanation offered here more fully fits the facts.

It is, of course, quite possible that in the early days of Chinese settlement in Malacca, Malay wives or concubines were acquired, especially in the days before the influence of Islam became sufficiently strong to be a barrier to intermarriage. It is also possible that Malay baby girls were adopted by members of the Chinese community, but brought up culturally Chinese, or later as Peranakans, in order to increase the "reservoir" of marriageable women in the community. It is also quite possible that, at least in some cases, the lack of "memory" of any Malay ancestors is simply a reflection of the fact that, in the early days, people were simply not conscious of rather rigid ethnic categories, and so naturally married Malay women without reflecting on this. Again, it can be argued that the appearance of strict ethnic boundaries only appeared with the colonial era. On the other hand, the Chinese as a group have traditionally tended to be "racial purists"; so the apparent lack of Malay ancestors may well be a fact and not simply a distortion induced by changing Baba perceptions of the past, and of ethnic boundaries.

What then does account for the emergence of Baba culture, and why did it spring into being when it did? The answer that I would propose, in two words, is British Colonialism. When Penang was acquired by the British in 1786, it had virtually no inhabitants. By the early 1830s, it had 40,000 of which only 9,000 were Chinese, but by 1858 the population had risen to 58,000, of which 24,000 were Chinese. This rising predominance of the Chinese was responsible for the cultural separateness of the Straits Settlements from the rest of Malaya. By the time the major influx of migrant Chinese began in the 1870s, the Straits Chinese community was already established. This is to be explained by a number

of factors -- the attraction of the incipient Babas to English education<sup>5</sup> in the form of mission schools (for example, the Anglo-Chinese College founded by William Farquhar in 1818); the willingness to enter employment in the Colonial Service where a knowledge of English was required, there being virtually no Chinese speaking European civil servants until after the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in 1877. This had meant that Chinese translations of new laws had to be prepared in Hong Kong before this date. It might also be noted that, after the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate, and partly perhaps because of it, Chinese society in the Straits tends to bifurcate into two groups -- mainstream Chinese society with its main organizational peculiarity, the secret societies; and Baba society (which did have some links with the secret societies, but relatively few and weak) which was oriented towards the colonial social system. And, finally, a willingness to identify with the new Malayan homeland.

This latter was undoubtedly a combination of subjective factors, and of objective ones, including the availability of regular employment of high status in the Straits Settlements and the Chinese ban on immigration in 1858 which made links with China difficult to maintain on the part of those who had migrated before the ban. The British, in turn, responded to the linguistic abilities and procolonial social attitudes of the Babas by employing them in large numbers. This attitude of reciprocal toleration and respect can be seen in the way in which a number of Babas rose to social and political prominence in the Straits Settlements (for example, Lim Boon Keng, Song Ong Siang, and later Tan Cheng Lock, among others), in the writings of prominent Babas in the *Straits Chinese Magazine* (1897-1907) which were in part responsible for the formation in 1900 of the Straits Chinese British Association, the main Baba political organ until the foundation of the Malayan Chinese Association in 1949.

The main, or at least a very major, reason for the emergence of Straits Chinese in the nineteenth century was thus the existence of a colonial environment which provided status, employment, security, prosperity and peace. The Babas did not, however, adopt much from the colonialists, in the way of European culture, other than language, and the Sino-Malay synthesis was never adulterated by other

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<sup>5</sup> J.D. Vaughan, *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements* (Singapore: 1879, Reprinted 1971, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press).

influences. Indeed, the Babas insisted on retaining their own distinct identity, which they regarded as essentially Chinese (and indeed purer than that of the peasant immigrants from China), perhaps as a reaction or accommodation to the cultural apartheid of colonial society. This, of course, gave rise to the curious ambivalence which continues down to this day -- a desire to absorb education, language and in some cases religion from the West, but yet insisting on a Chinese ethnic identity despite lack of any contact with China or even ability to speak any of the Chinese dialects.

The Babas, of course, like any other group of "overseas Chinese", should not be regarded as a socially homogeneous lump. The Babas were themselves stratified by class and occupation, by education, and even by dialect origin, even when actual practical knowledge of those dialects was missing. The proud embracing of British citizenship, the adoption of the tag "The King's Chinese", the efforts made to found a Baba company in the Singapore militia were simply a further step. But note that there is something of a paradox here -- the Babas did not become British culturally, but utilized the advantages of colonialism to establish their own culture in a friendly environment. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> this attitude proved to be double-edged -- the very situation which enabled Baba culture to flourish between the midnineteenth century and the 1940s also proved its undoing, and a great deal of initiative (particularly political initiative) passed out of Baba hands after 1945 into the hands of the Malay nationalists and those Chinese who had actively opposed the Japanese and who were determined to create a new noncolonial society after the war.

### Contemporary Socio-Political Factors

What has been suggested up to this point is that a specific and unique historical explanation is required for the emergence of Baba identity, rather than a general sociological explanation which accounts for things in terms of, for example, "race", relationships between ethnicity and occupation, etc.

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6 J. Clammer, "Overseas Chinese Assimilation and Resinification: A Malaysian Case Study," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1975, p. 11.

Such factors do, however, have a role to play, both as objective determinants of the boundaries set to a particular ethnic identity, and as specifying the subjective assessment by the members of the group in question of their "folk model" of ethnic identity in general and what constitutes their ethnicity in general. And, of course, these features may not entirely coincide or be universally applicable. For instance, an insider's view of his own ethnic identity may be different from that of an outsider; one ethnic group may be defined in terms of occupation, another in terms of religion, and so on.

Nevertheless, and despite this confusion, there are some sociological features of the Baba situation which have real bearing on their identity. The first of these is urbanization. The Babas represent an essentially urban phenomenon, and this is reflected in residence, occupation, material culture and preference for an urban milieu as context for their way of life. Some small groups of rural Babas are to be found, but these are much more highly assimilated into the surrounding dominant culture than are the urban Babas, and are often very difficult to distinguish as a distinct group at all.<sup>7</sup> There is of course a close connection between colonialism and the emergence of the cities of the Straits Settlements as major governmental and commercial centres.

Others which we might briefly list here<sup>8</sup> are (i) the decline of ethnic segregation in Malacca, Penang and Singapore, and the progressive settling of Baba families throughout these urban areas; (ii) the role of language, particularly English, in the Baba community, which is important not only for the way in which ability in English was in the past at least taken as a characteristic of the Babas, but also in the way in which it acted as a barrier to a higher degree of assimilation into "mainstream" Chinese culture, by distinguishing the Babas as "separate", by preventing intermarriage with dialect-only speakers, and by militating against the acquisition of Mandarin or a Chinese dialect by, particularly, younger Babas; (iii) Religion, and in particular the predominance of Buddhism

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7 L.A.P. Gosling, "Migration and Assimilation of Rural Chinese in Trengganu." In J. Bastin and R. Roolvink, eds., *Malayan and Indonesian Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

8 They are discussed more fully in Clammer 1978, 1975, op.cit. and in my "Religion and Assimilation in Straits Chinese Society," *Review of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. VI, 1976.

and Chinese Religion amongst the Babas, which acts as a strong bond of identity with other Chinese and the "Great Tradition". It is true that many Babas gravitate to a purer form of Buddhism than many Chinese religionists, and it is also true that many practise a syncretic form of religion which utilizes Malay divinatory techniques. Perhaps the most notable feature of Baba religious behaviour, given their alleged closeness to Malay culture, is the almost total lack of impact that Islam (especially in its "high" rather than in its "folk" varieties) has had on the community. The ethnographic evidence strongly suggests that the Babas are in fact almost totally assimilated to Chinese religion, especially in terms of religious cosmology, and that their closeness to the Malays is thus much more apparent than real, and extends only to certain externals; in the case of religion there being certain techniques and practices, these exist and are grafted on to a wholly Chinese style of religion and cosmology.<sup>9</sup> (iv) The nonexistence of clan, dialect and territorial associations amongst the Babas, and the only partial replacement of the functions of these institutions with, for example, the Straits Chinese British Association (until its decline), the Buddhist Association in Malacca and the Peranakan Association in Singapore. None of these substitutes, however, occupy anything like the role of the traditional associations in non-Straits Chinese society. (v) There has been considerable decline in the obvious external markers of Peranakan culture; for example, traditional dress is now largely confined to elderly and middle-aged ladies; and Malay is now spoken by many non-Baba Chinese as a consequence of political and other trends in Malaysia. It is consequently becoming harder to distinguish Peranakans from other Chinese by such visible features. All this brings us to the question "Who is a Baba"?

### Who is a Baba?

First, we must accept that the Peranakan community is internally stratified -- by generation, by religion, by linguistic competence and by occupation and class. Secondly, as already noted, many of the factors which at least in the past served to distinguish Peranakans from non-Peranakans have disappeared. As some Babas are

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9 See Cecilia Ng Siew Hua, "The Sam Poh Neō Keramat -- A Study of a Baba Chinese Temple," Academic Exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1977.

undergoing the process of resinification by learning Mandarin or their own ancestral dialect and/or by assimilating themselves to mainstream Chinese religious and cultural practices, and as nearly all Chinese, Baba or not, in Singapore are tending to undergo a process of Anglicization (of language and, to some extent, of culture), differentials are likely to become even more obscure. Thirdly, virtually all younger generation Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore are now "Straits born", so origin in itself has become irrelevant as an ethnicity marker. These factors do then point towards another very interesting question -- that of the application of the concepts of assimilation, integration and the aforementioned resinification to the Babas. Are they, in fact, a perpetually marginal group because they are always being assimilated by someone else -- the Malays, the mainstream Chinese culture, or anglicized Chinese culture? In other words, is the definition of Baba ethnicity essentially a negative one -- what they are not, in the sense that they occupy the little gaps or interstices not somehow occupied by Malay culture on the one hand and Chinese on the other? There is in fact some element of truth in this idea, but the degree of truth depends upon the resolution of a conceptual issue. This issue is as follows: do we regard Baba culture as something occupying the "middle ground", a kind of no-man's-land, between the allegedly homogeneous Malay and Chinese cultures; or do we abandon this idea of the main culture's homogeneity, and regard Baba culture as a subvariant, amongst others, of one or other of the sources -- as Malayanized Chinese or as sinicized Malay, depending on one's perspective; or is it really something altogether new -- a genuine synthesis of the two cultures, but yet somehow transcending both?

The latter is an attractive idea, and would have much to recommend it, were it not contradicted by a close scrutiny of the ethnographic facts, and by the perpetuation of an error common in discussion of ethnicity -- notably the confusion of culture with ethnicity. A group of people who attach to themselves a particular ethnic label may not in practice, in fact, have a culture altogether distinct from those who provide a different ethnic label for themselves, and nor will they necessarily possess a homogeneous culture. Ethnicity -- the ascription by self or others of a primary identity to a group of people and culture -- the integrated system of beliefs, values, customs, material productions and institutions acquired through learned behaviour by the members of a group, vary independently. Cultural differences are usually used as the distinguishing markers of an ethnic group, although they may not be the only ones, the well-

known principle of "race", that is, real or alleged genetic or phenotypical differences, especially in folk classifications, being frequently another.

This leads in to two important considerations. One of these is that we can argue that there is no absolutely distinctive Baba Chinese culture, but that this culture is heterogeneous, has evolved progressively over time, and is and was in many instances the product of particular historical and structural features. An example of the latter is the sense of clannishness among many Malacca Babas, which results not so much from any feelings of ingroup loyalty (on the contrary, many are reluctant to admit that they are Babas), but because of outgroup pressure from non-English or Malay speaking non-Baba Chinese who regard the Babas as soft, lazy, unsuitable marriage partners, and as woefully lacking in many desirable Chinese characteristics, but yet insist that the Babas are Chinese, and are most certainly not Malays, even though they may be rather funny Chinese. The second is that the Babas in turn insist that they are indeed Chinese, more so than many "recent" immigrants since they preserve intact traditions unknown to their originally illiterate and peasant stock Chinese neighbours, which incidentally provides us with an interesting variant on Barbara Ward's excellent little study on the perception of tradition and identity amongst another "marginal" Chinese group -- the Hong Kong boat people.<sup>10</sup> In other words, they ascribe to themselves an unequivocally Chinese identity, and will back this up by pointing not only to cultural features, but also to their ancestry, or in folk terms, their "race". As I have indicated, the ethnographic data bears this out -- below the seemingly Malay exterior (other than in terms of physical appearance, which is distinctly Chinese) one finds a basically Chinese identity. The Babas, in other words, possess a Malayanized culture, but a fundamentally Chinese ethnic affiliation.

This is also supported by Benjamin's argument in his analysis of Singapore's "multiracialism"<sup>11</sup> that, at least in the case of Singapore, the official ideology of multiracialism has tended to promote what he terms "cultural involution", that is, the turning back by the various local cultures to what they see as being their own cultural origins or homelands as they seek for their "identity". The Babas

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10 Barbara Ward, "Varieties of the Conscious Model: The Fishermen of South China." In M. Banton, ed., *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1965).

11 G. Benjamin, "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's 'Multi-racialism'." In R. Hassan, ed., *Singapore: Society in Transition* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976).

would thus tend to look to Chinese culture as the main tradition with which they can identify. This has not been empirically verified in Singapore, but it has been in Malaysia, where the process has been speeded up by the fears of Malay cultural hegemony resulting in a distinct process of resinification.<sup>12</sup> This process is reinforced by the barriers to assimilation into the other possible group, the Malays, and in particular by the barrier of religion. While Chinese religion attracts the Babas towards the Chinese camp, Islam repels, not because of its doctrinal content, but because of the social and cultural consequences of becoming Muslims, which again illustrates how deep a gulf is in fact fixed between the Babas and the Malays. Many Babas indeed feel that, given that they are already in a slightly uncomfortable position halfway between the Chinese and the Malays, embracing Islam would banish them to complete social marginality -- as not Chinese, yet now fully accepted by the Malays (although many Malays, when questioned about their perception of the identity of the Babas will reply that "They are just like us"), and will point to known examples of this being the fate of converts, both in Malaysia and in Java.

To return to the historical argument discussed earlier, I have elsewhere proposed that

It must also be added that a good deal of integration and disappearance of overt social conflict can occur in a society without assimilation as such taking place. The Colonial régime achieved a certain degree of integration, but in doing so created many of the paradoxical features of the situation which prevent assimilation.<sup>13</sup>

We now seem to face just such a situation where the outcome for the Babas is likely to be determined by the interaction of two forces -- on the one hand, the pressures encouraging resinification which are obliging the Babas to redefine themselves unequivocally as Chinese, as they can neither sit on the fence, nor in Malaysia claim *Bumiputra* (native born, applied normally only to Malays) status. And, on the other hand, certain "levelling" features of social development which are tending to erode Baba distinctiveness, including the spread of English and Malay, and a willingness on the part of all Chinese to regard Malaysia or

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12 Clammer, op.cit., 1975.

13 Ibid., p. 17.

Singapore as their homeland. We may in fact be facing now a situation where we tend almost automatically to appeal to ethnic factors as explaining the basic dynamics of multiethnic social systems, such as those of Malaysia and Singapore, when other forces such as class may well predominate, and explain inter and intraethnic relations, rather than the other way around.

### Baba Ethnicity Management

Baba ethnicity, then, is indicated by a number of markers -- dress, food, language, actual or putative ancestry, having been born locally, usually into a family with several generations Straits born, self-identity, and identity ascribed by others on the basis of these emblems, and in some cases others, too, such as occupation or residence. In practice, the actual emphasis given to these markers has changed. For example, in 1870, it is estimated that only 20% of the Malacca and Singapore Babas could speak Chinese.<sup>14</sup> But, by 1975, the number was approximately 42% in Malacca, and higher in Penang, and rising in both cases. Nonya food also is undergoing a revival in Singapore. Dress is tending to disappear as a marker and residence has already largely done so. In some families, the practices of Chinese filial piety and ancestor veneration have continued to a greater extent than they have in many mainstream Chinese families. The specific boundaries of Baba identity are thus rather blurred, but then this is probably true of virtually every ethnic group in Southeast Asia or elsewhere. Rather than search for timeless and unchanging parameters of ethnic identity, it is often much more useful to look at the ways in which identity is managed in practice and the functions that it fulfils.

One of these ways is the emergence of stereotypes, in which qualities of softness are ascribed by non-Baba Chinese to the Peranakans, and Nonyas are even referred to as *fan-por* -- "foreign women" -- by Cantonese speakers, but not interestingly enough by other dialect speakers. The Babas reciprocate by regarding other Chinese -- the *Orang-orang Cina* -- as competitive, brusque and materialistic. These stereotypes have their origin in the past, when the Babas

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14 M. Freedman, "Chinese Kinship and Marriage in Singapore." *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1962.

had more reason to represent themselves as a distinct and bounded group, but like all stereotypes, they have the habit of persisting even if the original reasons for their appearance have disappeared. In particular, the association of the Babas with noncommercial activities and the other Chinese with commerce tends to support the argument of a growing body of literature which suggests that commercial activity itself can be an important marker of ethnicity.<sup>15</sup>

The stabilization of Baba society in the early nineteenth century with its characteristic cultural traits, occupational patterns and uxorilocal, extended family kinship system, thus provided the basis for principles which are still evolving as the community changes. The main problem has become that of how to control these changes. In the past, the Baba community defined its own boundaries and controlled them by regulating in-marriage. Today, this is no longer possible, as a result of the culturally "levelling" features of Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese culture mentioned earlier, and of the corresponding impossibility of regulating marriage when there are no strong and distinct boundary markers to define one's own group vis-à-vis other groups in the society. This is possible to maintain with regard to the Malays (only one case of Baba-Malay intermarriage has come to my attention, and this one resulted in the Baba being ostracized from his own community), but is no longer unequivocally possible with regard to English educated Chinese, or even to members of the equally well-established stable Eurasian community, who indeed have many features in common with the Babas.<sup>16</sup> This is also complicated by stratification within the Baba community, not only class and occupational, but also Malaccan v. non-Malaccan families; Hokkien v. Teochew Babas; and, in Malacca, Heeren Street Babas v. Jonker Street Babas (the two streets are parallel to one another, but the former are considered "purer"); and even city centre Babas v. *kampung* (village) Babas. Individual Babas, therefore, not surprisingly sometimes find it difficult to locate themselves, or a prospective spouse, in this complicated network of linkages.<sup>17</sup> It is largely only

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15 See the articles by Wu and Foster in the *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1-2, 1977.

16 Diana Wong, "The Straits Chinese in Singapore," unpublished term paper, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore.

17 *Ibid.*, no pagination.

when a Peranakan is contrasted with a non-Straits-born Chinese or a Malay that the generic term "Baba" becomes very useful, or in other words who is excluded rather than who is included in the category by those who already believe themselves to be within it. This is also to be seen from the subjective ascription of Baba identity which insists that "Though the rules are lax about those who do not wish to be Babas, they are pretty stiff about those who can".<sup>18</sup> To acquire this identity, there must be cultural evidence in the form not so much of externals, but as orientation and a feeling of distinctiveness from other groups manifested in actual behaviour, such as choice of friends, marriage partners, occupation, etc.

Not surprisingly there is some dispute, both within and without the Baba community, as to the future and the survival value of Baba ethnic identity. Many informants will tell the investigator that he has arrived just in time, as there will be no Peranakan culture left in another few years, but on the other hand insist on the virility of what others see to be on its last legs. Part of the problem here arises from the criteria employed to decide whether Baba culture is declining or not -- since culture is taken by most people to be the main marker of Baba ethnicity, race being assumed to be constant and so not worth discussing. Another part of the problem is the cultural amorphousness of large segments of the Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese population. And a third takes us back to the question of differentials within the group. I have met those who argue that only Hokkien Babas are "real", although most of them no longer speak Hokkien. Some, when asked for their dialect, will say "Hokkien" (or whatever); others will say "Malay"; others "Baba Malay"; and yet others "Baba Hokkien", that is, they are Babas of Hokkien origin, regardless of whether they retain competence in the language. Sometimes, this dialect labelling has an interesting origin in that it reflects a desire to have a dialect affiliation when one is absent. It is not uncommon to meet Babas who are rather ashamed or embarrassed by their lack of Chinese and will insist on pointing out that their being Babas excuses them from needing such linguistic knowledge. But it is also true that I have never yet met an English educated Chinese in Singapore or Malaysia who could not speak Chinese who claimed to be a Baba on these grounds, if all or some of the other cultural markers were absent. The claim sometimes heard that all Straits born Chinese

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18 Ibid., n.p.

are Babas, especially the English educated, is not verified by the data on the connection between language and ethnicity in the two states. It does seem to me, however, that there are some general principles at work behind all this ambiguity, which I will now attempt to summarize.

### Ethnic Cultures and Multiracialism

It could be argued that there has been a general decline in the definitiveness of ethnic boundaries in Malaysia and Singapore in recent years, that is, that being a "Malaysian" or "Singaporean" takes priority in identity ascription over "race", and that everybody is gradually becoming assimilated to some form of multiethnic national culture. There is some evidence for this, but not nearly enough to argue that this means the disappearance of the old racial/culture labels. This raises some interesting questions about the dynamics of ethnicity in plural societies, or at least in the two plural societies under discussion.

There is, of course, some merging of cultural institutions within the plural societies of Malaysia and Singapore. In the case of the Babas, their originally exclusive associations -- the Chinese Swimming Club, the Straits Chinese British Association, the Straits Chinese Recreation Club, for example, in Singapore -- are no longer exclusive. Some activities such as the Dondang Sayang troupes (which perform songs, dances and recite "pantun" or Malay poetry) are now confined to more elderly Babas or, in one case known to me, are composed of mixed Baba and Malay members. The cohesiveness of the community has declined, but this does not necessarily mean its disappearance, as is often assumed. Ethnicity, like religion, can change its form and adapt, without actually going away. Indeed, there is some evidence that Baba culture is becoming revitalized, at least in Singapore, perhaps precisely because it sees itself as threatened. Is the ethnic label following suit?

The obvious parallel to the Babas in Malaysia and Singapore is that of the Peranakan Chinese in Java,<sup>19</sup> who, it appears, now form a stable group which

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19 See, for example, Mely Tan Giok-Lan, *The Chinese of Sukabumi: A Study in Social and Cultural Accommodation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1963) and D.E. Willmott, *The Chinese of Semarang* (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1960).

is not undergoing assimilation either to the other Chinese or to the Javanese (except perhaps in some rural instances). Why is this not true of Malaysia and Singapore? One reason is a structural one -- that the Chinese in Singapore form a numerical majority, in Malaysia comprises a very large majority, but in Indonesia form a small, although important, minority. Given that Indonesia is itself culturally highly plural, it may be that the pressures for assimilation (as opposed to integration) are less, and that there is in any case no parallel for the process of resinification or of assimilation to a majority Chinese culture, as there isn't one. A better parallel in Indonesia indeed would be the Eurasians whose role under the Dutch, to some extent, mirrors that of the Babas under the British. The existence of a majority Chinese culture with which the Babas already had links, the claiming of the Chinese racial category, the demise of British rule and the society which sustained early Baba culture and the pressures of postcolonial nationalism and nation building all go a long way to accounting for the problems of postwar Baba society. In Malaysia, this is reflected in the feeling that the only political future for the Babas lies with the Chinese, and in Singapore the feeling that, in a predominantly Chinese state, the best thing to be is, again, Chinese.

With the rise of an enhanced state of political integration and with the emergence of classes in society, ethnicity does not necessarily disappear, but on the contrary class may well find its expression through ethnicity, as is particularly true in colonial societies. Any attempt to argue that the Babas represent a class phenomenon -- a "leisure class" separated in this respect from the rest of Chinese society and indulging this leisure through sports, cooking, etc. -- is likely, however, to founder first on the problem of the social heterogeneity of the Babas who were and are themselves divided on classlike lines, and secondly on the extent to which other groups -- some Chinese and many Indians and Eurasians -- also adopted colonial manners and elegant lifestyles for their élites.

### Steps Towards a Conclusion

It has been a major part of my argument that the Babas are a political, rather than a cultural, phenomenon -- that is, they were originally a product of the social relations of a colonial society based on a rigid system of stratification which, however, encouraged a certain degree of accommodation from groups who

were prepared to take the step (which was not, in those days, a risky one) of identifying their interests with those of the colonialists. In Malaysia and Singapore, it was those who were to become known as Babas who rose to this challenge. Accordingly, with the decline of the political culture which nurtured them, the Babas have declined correspondingly. The occupational specialization of better-off Babas and, in particular, their eschewing of the rampant commercialism of the other Chinese which also arose in this self-same colonial context endowed the Babas with many of their other traits, and the cultural characteristics -- loss of Chinese language, emphasis on culinary and domestic craft arts -- were largely consequences, not causes, of this economic trend.

The ambiguity of identity which now afflicts the Babas is thus largely due to a fundamental ambiguity in the cultural milieu in which they now find themselves -- the political structures of colonialism have passed away, taking with them the major rationale for Baba existence as a distinct group, but the racial characteristics engendered by that same colonial polity have not passed away, but are indeed reinforced by current policies in independent Malaysia and Singapore. The very fact of emphasis on "race" breeds continuing concern with that highly amorphous concept. As Benjamin rightly points out, it is a paradox that "multiracialism" does not lead to an integrated culture in Singapore, but to more attention being paid to the distinctive aspects of the individual "ethnic" cultures.<sup>20</sup> The Baba is thus faced with a difficult identity problem -- he has a culture, but one for which the sustaining conditions have vanished, but yet he is encouraged to think of his culture as an important contribution to the Singapore ethnographic scene. Indeed, I have even heard it said that the Baba culture is the only "truly" Singaporean culture. Multiracialism as a policy may well therefore have the (presumably unintended) consequence of artificially supporting minority cultures when, in the normal course of events, they would probably pass naturally away.

The theoretical interest that the Baba case poses does not end there though, as it suggests some further observations. The first of these is the general thesis suggested above that, in defining ethnic groups or their formation, "primordality" is far less significant than the specific historical and politico-economic factors which underlie the sociological factors in the given situation. The general concept

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20 Benjamin, op.cit., 1976.

of ethnicity, for example, Barth's well-known definition of ethnicity as "a membership which identifies itself and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order"<sup>21</sup> may be universal, but particular instances will vary greatly within the field of this general definition. The second is that this study supports the increasingly accepted argument that "culture" and "ethnicity" are or can be independent of one another. The third is that the concept of "race", and in this case the concept of being a Chinese, is an important folk category used by people (and their governments) in defining their membership of an ethnic group, quite regardless of anthropological doubts about the scientific validity or content of the term. Both the terms "ethnicity" and "race", therefore, have strong ideological as well as practical connotations.

The fourth is that success in avoiding erosion of ethnic group boundaries lies in the ability to avoid a situation of powerlessness in a social sense in which access to decision-making processes is lost and the groups' own criteria for success and identity can no longer carry the day in competition with the parallel demands of other groups. Ethnicity can, as is well known, be used as a powerful vehicle for organizing people and expressing demands until this kind of "power deprivation" ensues, with a resulting loss of access to goods, services and avenues of influence. But yet it cannot be assumed that members of a group which falls into this state, as did the Babas after circa 1945, will necessarily abandon it and seek some other identity. Many will prefer to go down with the ship, if go down it does, as evidenced by many Babas who tenaciously cling to their Peranakan identity, even though according to a functional interpretation they should seek an alternative ethnic affiliation, as there would be some immediate benefit in doing so. Part of the explanation for this is that the Babas already regard themselves as ethnically Chinese, and partly because we should not underestimate the role of tradition and sentiment. Even if people can, they do not necessarily change their ethnic identity just because it is "advantageous" to do so.

The sense in which both Malaysia and Singapore are "plural societies" is thus put systematically to the test by the Baba case. Baba society is, in my opinion, well worth studying not only for its ethnographic richness, but for the

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21 F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969), Introduction.

way in which it illustrates complex problems of ethnic identity and continuity, of the role of history in ethnic group formation and in the sustaining role of political structures, practices and ideologies in ethnic group continuation, above and beyond "racial" and "cultural" factors. If this in turn forces a closer look at the logic of arguments involving the concepts of "ethnicity", "multiracialism" and "pluralism", the Babas will have more than justified their appearance, and perhaps their continuance, on the Singaporean and Malaysian sociological scene.

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