



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**RESISTING HEGEMONY AND DEFENDING CHINESE IDENTITY IN
SELECTED NOVELS BY MALAYSIAN CHINESE WRITERS**

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By

TAN CHYE SING

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in
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January 2010



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of University Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Chairman: Dr Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya

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The purpose of this study is to find out how the theory of hegemony and various types of hegemonies are applicable in the analysis of the novels. It also focuses on how hegemony and its resistance assist us to understand Chinese identity, especially in the Malaysian context. This theory is used to analyse how the protagonists engage hegemony and its resistance in defending Chinese identity as portrayed in the novels by Malaysian Chinese writers. The four selected novels are Yang-May Ooi's *Mindgame* (2000), Chong Seck Chim's *Once Upon a Time in Malaya* (2005), Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), and Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007). These novels are chosen because they promote Chinese philosophy, culture and history, which are also embraced by the Chinese protagonists - Fei in *Mindgame*, Ah Kiew in *Once Upon a Time in Malaya*, Johny Lim in *The Harmony Silk Factory*, and Philip Hutton in *The Gift of Rain*.



The study of hegemony is based mainly on Antonio Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, and *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Jonathan Joseph's *Hegemony: A Realist Analysis*, as well as Mao Tse-tung's *On Guerilla Warfare*, which provide deep insights into how hegemony works and the strategies of resisting it. Hegemony is found in politics, the economy, history, culture, philosophy and even religion in society. The main theory engages constant changes and could be interpreted differently according to the time, political, historical and cultural contexts. The symbiotic relationship between hegemony and other related concepts such as diasporic resistance, difference, and Chinese Communism in resisting ideological, educational and economic hegemonies is discussed. In resisting historical, religious and cultural hegemonies, the hegemonic concepts of revolution, alienation and dislocation are applied and elaborated. By resisting hegemony, the Chinese protagonists in the texts revisit their ancestral roots, Chinese history, religion, culture and language to defend their Chinese identity.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah.

**MENENTANG HEGEMONI DAN MEMPERTAHANKAN IDENTITI CINA DI
DALAM NOVEL-NOVEL TERPILIH OLEH PENULIS-PENULIS CINA
MALAYSIA**

Oleh

TAN CHYE SING

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Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mencari penggunaan teori hegemoni dalam novel-novel, jenis-jenis hegemoni dan bagaimana penentangan hegemoni membolehkan kita memahami identiti orang Cina dalam konteks Malaysia. Teori ini digunakan untuk menganalisa watak-watak yang mengaitkan hegemoni serta penentangannya dalam usaha untuk mempertahankan identiti orang Cina yang dipaparkan di dalam novel-novel karya penulis berbangsa Cina Malaysia. Keempat-empat novel yang dipilih ialah Yang-May Ooi, *Mindgame*, (2000), Chong Seck Chim, *Once Upon a Time in Malaya*, Tash Aw, *The Harmony Silk Factory*, (2005) dan Tan Twan Eng, *The Gift of Rain*, (2007). Novel-novel ini dipilih kerana para penulis mempromosikan falsafah, kebudayaan dan sejarah Cina yang juga dihayati oleh watak-watak utama novel; Fei, dalam novel *Mindgame*, Ah Kiew dalam novel *Once Upon a Time in Malaya*, Johny Lim dalam *The Harmony Silk Factory* serta Philip Hutton dalam *The Gift of Rain*.



Pengajian teori hegemoni terutamanya berdasarkan kepada *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* oleh Antonio Gramsci, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* oleh Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony: A Realist Analysis* oleh Jonathan Joseph dan *On Guerilla Warfare* oleh Mao Tse-Tung memberi perspektif yang lebih baik tentang bagaimana hegemoni beroperasi dan cara-cara untuk menentangnya. Hegemoni terdapat dalam bidang politik, ekonomi, sejarah, kebudayaan, falsafah dan juga agama. Teori utama ini berpaksikan perubahan semasa dan boleh ditafsirkan mengikut masa serta dalam konteks politik, sejarah dan kebudayaan. Hubungan simbiotik hegemoni dengan konsep-konsep yang berkaitan seperti penentangan diaspora, kelainan dan Komunisme Cina dalam penentangan hegemoni ideologi, pendidikan dan ekonomi turut dibincangkan. Penentangan hegemoni sejarah, agama dan kebudayaan, dapat dijayakan dengan amalan konsep-konsep hegemoni seperti revolusi, pengasingan dan kebangkitan kedudukan. Dengan menentang hegemoni, watak-watak protagonis Cina di dalam novel-novel berkenaan telah menyelusuri sejarah, agama, kebudayaan, bahasa dan akar umbi nenek moyang mereka demi mempertahankan identiti bangsa Cina.

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APPROVAL

I certify that an Examination Committee met on the 22nd of January 2010 to conduct the final examination of Tan Chye Sing on his Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled “Resisting Hegemony and Defending Chinese Identity in Selected Novels by Malaysian Chinese Writers” in accordance with Universiti Putra Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and University Putra Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or other institutions.

TAN CHYE SING

Date:



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This thesis focuses on how hegemony works, the various types of hegemonies, and the hegemonic concepts of resistance in defending Chinese identity as portrayed in the four Malaysian Chinese novels. The hegemonic concepts discussed by Antonio Gramsci, Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and Jonathan Joseph are derived mostly from Marxism. The four selected novels are Yang-May Ooi's *Mindgame* (2000), Chong Seck Chim's *Once Upon a Time in Malaya* (2005), Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), and Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007).

These novels were selected because of their rich local Chinese philosophical contents, lucidity, clarity and relevance to the theory of hegemony. Moreover, they are based on the perspectives of Malaysian Chinese authors. Another reason is that the authors, Chong Seck Chim, Tan Twan Eng, and Tash Aw devise the era of the Japanese occupation of Malaya as the historical backgrounds of their mentioned novels. On the other hand, Yang-May Ooi focuses on contemporary issues such as economic crisis and ideological hegemony in modern Malaysia under Malay hegemony. It is also noted that in the novel, the Chinese characters use "Asian Values" to resist hegemonic intrusions in their cultural life. I am also aware that these novels promote the development of the culture, history, politics, philosophy, economy, and intellectual domains of the



Malaysian Chinese. The term “Malaysian Chinese” or the extent of Chineseness of Chinese in Malaysia is best described by Wang Gungwu in his book on ethnic studies,

Don't Leave Home - Migration and Chinese:

Firstly, as an historian, I was sure that the land called China, with a continuous history, must surely have produced something that could be pointed to as Chineseness. Secondly, as a Chinese who was born and grew up outside China, I assumed that all Chinese outside would have something in common with those inside China, and that would be Chineseness. In fact, I found it easier to find the Chineseness rooted in history than the shared qualities among people known as Chinese around the world (Wang 182-183).

Wang's definition of Chineseness, which is “rooted” in historical development is almost similar to Gramsci's belief that analysing history is important in unravelling the identity and the hegemonic roles of intellectuals and people in the country. Therefore, it has influenced me to select the stipulated four novels which are written by Malaysian Chinese writers. The four novels have ample historical evidence and contemporary issues which would enable me to understand how the Chinese community survives in defending their Chineseness in Malaya later Malaysia. Defending Chineseness does not mean resorting to terrorism, as it can be done through more constructive channels.

Sharon A. Carstens in her book, *Histories, Cultures, Identities: Studies in Malaysian Chinese Worlds* describes how the Malaysian Chinese defend their Chineseness:

If pre-World War II Chinese nationalism in its several forms both re-sinicized and fragmented Southeast Asian Chinese identities, then post-World War II Southeast Asian independence movements, with their resulting nation states, completely reconfigured the diverse possibilities for Chinese cultural retention under the new political regimes. In contrast with most other new Southeast Asian states, Malaysia, with its large Chinese population, permitted the continuation of

Chinese schools, Chinese newspapers, Chinese religions, and other Chinese cultural institutions (140).

All these mentioned aspects are relevant in explaining how the theory of hegemony is applied. The discussion of the role of the Malaysian Chinese in their resistance to the various hegemonies in the country is analyzed in accordance with the issues embedded in the novels. The theory reveals how the adoption of the resistance strategy enables the Malaysian Chinese to find their own cultural identity. It encompasses the significance of the survival of the Chineseness within the Chinese diasporas.

The novels also portray the importance of the political and historical development which can be analyzed in tandem with the tenets of hegemony. The theory of hegemony is mainly studied in order to comprehend the role of Malaysian Chinese psyche and consciousness in the various stipulated domains. It explains the “fluidity of psyche” because of the factors of constant change of class interests and material conditions in the community. The main merit of this theory is to encourage me to keep abreast of the constant development or changes of the culture, politics, history, and social intelligence of life, which have an impact on Malaysian Chinese. In this thesis, Gramsci’s version of hegemony is one of the primary sources of references. I am also interested in relating various Marxist and also Machiavellian concepts which are discussed by Gramsci himself in explaining the main theory. He himself has derived some ideas from Marxism and Machiavelli as he was influenced by his predecessor, Karl Marx. Moreover, the theory of hegemony and to a certain extent, incorporated Marxist ideas, explains the societal consciousness in dealing with myriad issues and dilemmas. For example, Chong Seck Chim’s *Once Upon a Time in Malaya* tackles the historical



accounts of the Malaysian Chinese who participated in the Communist resistance to the various hegemonies. Hence, they are heavily stereotyped as Communist sympathizers for many decades and even until Mahathir's era in Malaysia. Ian Stewart in *The Mahathir Legacy - A Nation Divided, A Region at Risk*, says that the demands by the Chinese for equal rights were politicized and regarded by Mahathir as the manifestation of the Communist psyche, "He said the communists, most of whom were Chinese, wanted to 'totally abolish the special status of the Malays in Malaysia'" (191).

This has prompted me to find out whether Communism is synonymous with the Malaysian Chinese psyche, which is explained in the subsequent chapters. I would also like to reiterate that the main source of the theory of hegemony is from *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci, edited and translated by Quidin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (2005). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy - Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffee (1985), is also used as a major reference. Another source is David Forgacs's explanation on how the theory is justified in the modern perspective. Jonathan Joseph's analysis of the theory of hegemony is also discussed. Lenin-Trotsky on the mentioned theory, which is discussed by Jonathan Joseph, is also utilized in the thesis. The above-mentioned sources and Gramsci are used as an expansion of the theory. In order to comprehend how the theory of hegemony can be applied, it is vital to have a better perspective on the historical development in the country. This is in line with the main principle of the theory of hegemony, which promotes historical domain and its relation with the intellectual and moral leadership of the country. Antonio Gramsci, in his book *Selections from the*

Prison Notebooks, states that the understanding of intellectual and moral leadership is enhanced through acknowledging historical awareness and its impact on the leadership:

The historical unity of the ruling classes is realized in the state, and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of States. But it would be wrong to think that this unity is simply juridical and political (though such forms of unity do have their importance too, and not in a purely formal sense); the fundamental historical unity, concretely results from the organic relations between State or political society and “civil society” (52).

Hence, the historical unity of the ruling classes, which focuses on domination and subjugation and how the Malaysian Chinese resisted the British, Japanese, Communist and Malay hegemonies is discussed. The resistance is adopted because of the dissatisfaction among the community. Another reason is the foreign interference in the way of life of the Chinese community. The ideological imposition against the will of the Malaysian Chinese is another factor which gave rise to the uprising against various hegemonies. Max J Skidmore in his book, *Ideologies - Politics in Action*, states that:

Ideology provides cohesion by specifying a view of reality, it offers rules of conduct, it defines roles in society, and it provides identification with the group. An ideology helps evaluate, explain, and provide understanding by asserting answers to basic questions [...] (7).

Therefore, the ideology as defined, is to assist the state, or the leadership to achieve its domination and identification with the people. Manipulating ideology is also one of the many ways to reach consensual agreement with the people. In this context, various hegemonies try to “convince” the people, especially the Malaysian Chinese, to accept their ideologies. Ideologies are implemented in accordance with the historical

developments in the country. The study of the history of British, Japanese, Communist and Malay hegemonies is vital to understand how the Chinese arrived from South China and subsequently lived under the rule of these colonial powers. This section briefly explains the importance of the historical background in comprehending the existence and establishment of the Malaysian Chinese in the country.

1.1 Malaysian History

This section is the narration of Malaysian history which serves as a general introduction. It is also important to have the historical awareness of the Malaysian Chinese community under the British, Japanese, Communists and Malay rulers. This can be traced to the historical phenomena of how the Chinese immigrants from Mainland China had ventured abroad and established themselves in many countries, especially Malaya during the British colonial era which had begun in the early nineteenth century. They consolidated their power through restructuring the administration, politics, economy, society and the way of life in the country. During the Second World War, from 1939 to 1945, the British were defeated by the Japanese Imperial Army. Oong Hak Ching's *Chinese Politics in Malaya 1942-1955 - The Dynamics of British Policy* mentions how the British troops were defeated within a short duration:

On 8 December 1941, the Japanese forces began their attack on Malaya. One division of the 25th Army landed at Kota Bharu in the Malay state of Kelantan and another division landed at Songkhla in southeast Thailand. After sixty-nine days, the British troops were defeated (46).



In the late 1930s, the military uprising of the Japanese Imperial Army gave rise to the resurgence of the resistance movement. Hence, during the invasion of Malaya by the Japanese Imperial army which began on 8th December 1941, many took advantage of the chaotic period to create confusion. The spread of Communism in Malaya further exacerbated the situation. The Chinese in Malaya believed in Communism as a platform for resistance. Moreover, there was strong anti-Japanese sentiment among the Chinese in Malaya during the Japanese domination of Malaya. The Japanese manipulated the people under the pretext of liberating them from the British. The ambitious Japanese intention to change the politics, economy and social condition of the Malayan people, was regarded as a new form of Japanese hegemony. In order to carry out the “totalitarian ideas”, they resorted to “exterminate” the Chinese in Malaya in order to impose fear among the Chinese community. Therefore, during the Japanese occupation, thousands of Chinese were massacred as illustrated by Cheah Boon Kheng in his book, *Red Star Over Malaya* in which he reports on the process of degradation of the local Chinese psyche by the Japanese hegemony:

The *sook ching* bloodbath which continued throughout March, took a reported toll of 6,000 to 40,000 Chinese lives. The *sook ching* struck terror in Chinese communities throughout Malaya and, in the words of former General Manaki, who served in Yamashita’s army, it was the “biggest blot” on the Japanese administration of Malaya. This single act inevitably alienated the bulk of the Chinese population from the Japanese administration (23-24).

Based on this description, the Japanese hegemony created a more vicious terror than the British hegemony. The psychology of fear was manipulated to the highest degree in the perpetuation of the Japanese reign of terror in Malaya. The Japanese had been regarded

as ‘superciliously terrorists’ by the Chinese in mainland China and came to be similarly regarded by the Chinese in Malaya. After the Second World War, the Japanese were forced to surrender by the US and its Allied Forces. The bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima had inspired the spirit of resistance in the Malaysian Chinese. It was also the time when the British returned to revive their hegemony in Malaya. For the Chinese in Malaya, the Communist ideology was the only way of resistance to the Japanese imperialists. Aloysius Chin, in his book of *The Communist Party of Malaya* writes

Apart from a handful of traitors, every race and stratum hankered for unity to resist the Japanese. This propensity was particularly strong amongst the Chinese because of their exposure to many years of anti-Japanese propaganda and education to save the nation. Their hatred for the Japanese was extremely deep (25).

The spirit of resistance to the Japanese hegemony was strong and emotional, especially after the ‘Sook Ching’ experience. The mass extermination of the Chinese in Malaya reached epidemic proportions and the Chinese responded by mobilizing a mass resistance to the Japanese. The underlying cause of such extermination was the desire of the Japanese Imperial Army to exact revenge on the Chinese who had supported Mainland China against the Japanese in the Second World War. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday in their book, *Mao - The Unknown Story*, refer to the Marco Polo Bridge incident as the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war: “On 7 July 1937, fighting broke out between Chinese and Japanese troops at a place just outside Peking called the Marco Polo Bridge” (244). Indeed, the incident had an impact on the minds of the Malaysian Chinese. Chinese hatred of the Japanese Imperial Army was deeply-rooted and in *Chinese Politics in Malaya 1942-1955 - The Dynamics of British Policy*, Oong Hak Ching, describes the atrocities perpetrated against the local Chinese:



Yamashita's order was given with the instruction to carry it out in accordance with his letter. To the soldiers this meant 'summary execution' and they proceeded to carry out the massacre of the Chinese by rounding them up "for inspection and identification" (47).

When the British returned to Malaya after the surrender of the Japanese Imperial Army in 1945, the Communists stirred political trouble with the intention of filling the political vacuum. Like the Japanese, the Communists were cruel and brutal in terrorizing the Malayan people. Aloysius Chin in his book, *The Communist Party of Malaya* says:

Following the Japanese surrender of Malaya in September 1945, there was a disagreement in the Central Committee of the CPM as to the line the Party should take. A minority was all for the 'Chinese line' of a guerilla-based struggle and was highly critical of those in favour of the 'moderate line'. Finally, it was the militants who were in the majority that carried the day with the policy of political agitation and the creation of labour unrest (28).

Many suffered and the British worked very hard to exterminate the Communists. The Emergency Period from 1948 to 1960 was declared. Thousands of innocent victims perished in the name of the ideology or so-called Utopia which promotes equality and fairness amongst mankind. In his book, *Malaysia - The Making of A Nation*, Cheah Boon Kheng states that:

Even though the communist rebellion was an ideologically-oriented uprising that coincided with other Communist uprisings in Burma, the Philippines and Indonesia, it was also identified as an uprising which involved more Chinese than Malays or Indians because the Communist Party of Malaya was a predominantly Chinese movement (23).



Thus, the local Chinese identity in the minds of the non-Chinese was tarnished. In this context, the Malays and Indians negatively stereotyped the Chinese as Communist sympathizers. However, the British regime appreciated the Chinese who assisted them to defeat the Japanese and granted Federal citizenships to the Chinese who supported them and regarded Malaya as their home country. Malaya gained independence on 31st August 1957, after which the political scenario of the country changed rapidly. A new form of Malay hegemony began to exert itself. Malay hegemony can be defined as Malay influence in the politics, ideology, economy, law and social order of the country.

The process of hegemony, especially between the Malaysian Chinese and the Malay rulers is defined by an American scholar as political “bargain” in Cheah Boon Kheng’s

Malaysia - The Making of a Nation:

The political bargain realized great benefits for all parties, in many cases more than the original participants had expected to achieve. The Malays gained political independence, control of political organs, and a polity which was to be Malay in style and its system of symbols. In return the Chinese gained more than overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia had dreamed of -equal citizenship, political participation and office holding, unimpaired economic opportunity, and tolerance for their language, religion and cultural institutions. In the decade and a half since the great bargain was struck, the leadership of the major structures of the alliance has been remarkably stable ... (*Malaysia* 39).

The “great bargain” is a mode of “consensual consciousness” in the process of nation-building. To Joseph Femia, it is Gramsci’s definition of “some degree of conscious attachment to, or agreement with, certain core elements of the society” (38). This issue can be elaborated by studying the history of consensus between the Malays and non-

Malays. The consensus is vital as it consolidates Malay hegemony by forming a strong alliance with other race-based parties in Malaysia. Joseph Femia concurs with Gramsci's idea on the effectiveness of a powerful hegemony which is pivoted on the consensual agreement towards a stable society:

Within a social order, there must be a substratum of agreement so powerful that it can counteract the division and disruptive forces arising from conflicting interest. And this agreement must be in relation to the specific object-persons, beliefs, values etc. (*Political Thought* 39)

Therefore, the "substratum of agreement so powerful" is seen in the way Malaya and later Malaysia has been ruled by the same powerful political party since independence in 1957. The "substratum of agreement" can also refer to the sharing of power between the Malays and non-Malays in Malaysia. The country is governed by the thirteen political parties in the National Front or Barisan Nasional (formerly known as the Alliance or Parti Perikatan). Moreover, the sharing of power is regarded as the Malaysian formula which is conducive to the Malaysian scenario. However, Ye Lin-Sheng, in his book, *The Chinese Dilemma*, acknowledges that the Malaysian Chinese identity of resistance is strengthened because the Chinese in the country feel that they have been alienated. Being an alienated community as such in the country, it has to resist in order to overcome alienation. Ye Lin-Sheng identifies one of the causes:

Part of the Chinese dilemma in Malaysia is the fear of diminishing cultural distinctness [...] many issues relating to the identity of Malaysian Chinese remain unresolved (67).

The awareness of the above dilemma suggests that the Chinese in Malaysia are unique in their identity in that they have to overcome alienation by adopting various strategies.



Further elaboration of how the Chinese community lived under the British, Japanese and Communist hegemonies is found in Chapter II.

Statement of the Problem

The study of the theory of hegemony and its application in the aforementioned novels is relevant as can be seen in the description of culture, politics, history and social intelligence of the community portrayed by the authors. There are also the other embedded dilemmas, which are related to the mentioned novels, and the theory provides insights on how to address the problems. The theory of hegemony is mainly studied in order to comprehend the role of the Malaysian Chinese psyche and consciousness in the various stipulated domains. The reasons why the novels are selected are due to their similarity of themes of Chinese resistance in Malaya and later Malaysia, defending Chinese identity, including their diasporic link with China. An earlier decision had been to include the two novels, *Taikor* and *Nanyang* (which was nominated for the 2006 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award) by Khoo Kheng Hor, a new Malaysian Chinese writer who assumed the multiple roles of journalist, business executive, author etc. Although the novels are historical sagas of the Chinese, they are mainly focused on the migration of the Chinese from South Thailand to Malaysia in *Taikor* and the Chinese migration from China to Malaya and Singapore in *Nanyang*. The historical background and issues are too wide to be included in this thesis. On the other hand, the study of hegemony is wide and encompassing, especially in tackling the various complex issues and themes depicted in the novels. The main merit of this theory is to encourage the researcher to keep abreast of the constant development or changes of the culture, politics,