COMMUNICATING THE BABA-NYONYA CULTURAL IDENTITY

JAMES KUAKE BENG MUN

FBMK 2010 33
DEDICATION

This effort is dedicated to
my matriarchal grandmother
Bibik Seow Lee Neo
for believing in me,
my late father
Baba Kuake Joon San
who passed away just before I completed this research,
and my wife
Nyonya Jaqueline Voon
for her confidence in me.
Abstract of thesis submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

COMMUNICATING THE BABA-NYONYA CULTURAL IDENTITY

By

JAMES KUAKE BENG MUN

June 2010

Chairman : Associate Professor Ezhar Tamam, PhD
Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication

Baba-Nyonyas have been expressing their concern regarding maintaining the continuity of their cultural identity which is an important part of the Malaysian heritage today. They commonly express that their younger generation does not seem to be practicing the Baba-Nyonya cultural way of life.

This study is to provide empirical evidence of the changing levels of demonstration of Baba-Nyonya way of life as manifested in the practice of Baba-Nyonya lifestyle, illustrated by the extent of material culture of this community as seen in their homes and possession of artifacts, and the quest of members of this community to identify themselves and taking pride in their being a Baba-Nyonya.

A survey which returned 314 completed and usable questionnaires provided input from a spectrum of respondents representing generations of Baba-Nyonyas born from the 1920s through the 1990s, a span of seventy years. Respondents are delegates at the
21st Annual Baba-Nyonya Annual Convention held from 5th to 7th December 2008 in Melaka. Delegates are members of Penang, Melaka, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur local chapters of Baba-Nyonya associations who congregated annually, as they have been doing so for the past 21 years without interruption at their annual convention. Membership to local Baba-Nyonya associations require strict fulfillment of Baba-Nyonya bloodline and heritage.

The demonstration of Baba-Nyonya cultural identity as represented by the three mentioned dimensions provided indication of how much the respondents desire to maintain and continue their heritage. This is manifested by their efforts and desire to invite, persuade, even compel their offspring to participate and “live up” to the Baba-Nyonya way of life i.e. communicating and transmitting cultural identity (enculturation). “Desire” to transmit their culture apply to respondents who during the data collection process do not have children at that point but extrapolated what they will do in the event they do have children.

Pearson correlation indicated moderately positive and significant relationship between the demonstration of Baba-Nyonya cultural identity and the transmission of that culture. Multiple regression analysis indicated that the three dimensions of demonstration of Baba-Nyonya way of life contributed to 51 percent variance of enculturation efforts. The findings also indicated general decline in the demonstration of Baba-Nyonya cultural identity and efforts to transmit the culture but with a slight turnaround among respondents born in the 1990s. These can be explained by the broad and specific socio-economic and political scenarios surrounding these eras.
Abstrak thesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat of Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

MENGKOMUNIKASIKAN
IDENTITI BUDAYA BABA-NYONYA

Oleh
JAMES KUAKE BENG MUN

Jun 2010

Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Ezhar Tamam, PhD
Fakulti : Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi


Kajian ini bertujuan mendapatkan data empirikal tentang penukaran tahap demonstrasi cara hidup Baba-Nyonya melalui pengamalan, penghayatan artifak serta perasaan bangga dan mengenal diri sebagai ahli komuniti Baba-Nyonya.


Demonstrasi cara hidup Baba-Nyonya yang terdiri dari tiga dimensi yang disebutkan juga menunjukkan tahap hasrat dan keinginan responden untuk memastikan kesinambungan warisan budaya mereka. Ini dapat dilihat daripada usaha responden untuk menjemput, memujuk dan menyakinkan anak-anak mereka untuk memelihara kesinambungan identiti budaya mereka. Responden yang tidak ada anak ketika penyelidikan ini dijalankan menjawab soal selidik dengan membuat andaian “sekiranya/apabila mereka ada anak nanti.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I extend my heartfelt gratitude and thanks to members of my thesis supervisory committee consisting of its chairman, Associate Professor Dr. Ezhar Tamam, members Professor Dr. Md. Salleh Hj Hassan and Dr. Sarjit Singh s/o Darshan Singh for their guidance, advices and encouragement, without which this effort would be extremely difficult and not have seen its completion. Special mention is also extended to lecturers at Universiti Putra Malaysia, whose classes I attended including Professor Dr. Musa Abu Hassan, Dr. Narimah Ismail, Dr. Jusang Bolong and Associate Professor Dr. Mohd Majid Konting for providing me with the inspiration to pursue this postgraduate degree after a lapse of over 20 years since I completed my master’s degree.

I also express my gratitude to Baba Lincoln Chua, colleague and friend, for his comments and input regarding the research instrument. Gratitude is also extended to the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM), namely the organizing committee members of the 21st Annual Baba-Nyonya Convention 2008 for their kind permission and assistance in administering the research instrument, including PPCM EXCO members in 2008 when data collection was done for this research, President Yang Berbahagia Datuk Baba Phua Jin Hock, Honourable Secretary Nyonya Chin Siok Hoon, Assistant Secretary Baba Robert Seet and Committee Member Nyonya Betty Ong for their kind assistance and support.

I also acknowledge that this academic endeavor would also not have been possible without the support of my family especially my wife, Nyonya Jaqueline Voon, whose
unweaving support and encouragement kept me going and held my the spirit up, and
the trust and patience of his daughter, Nyonya Steffanie Grace who had to give up
bonding time with her father during her crucial developmental years.

Last but not least, I wish to document my appreciation for the support and friendship
of fellow doctoral students in the Department of Communication, University Putra
Malaysia, especially Saudara Haniff Hassan, where in comradeship we kept each other
going through the typical challenges of pursuing a post graduate degree while
balancing a career and family.

**Baba James Kuake**

**June 2010**
APPROVAL (Thesis Examination Committee)

I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 16 June 2010 to conduct the final examination of James Kuake Beng Mun on his thesis entitled “Communicating the Baba-Nyonya Cultural Identity” in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Members of the Thesis Examination Committee were as follows:

Zulhamri Abdullah, PhD  
Senior Lecturer  
Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairman)

Abdul Mua’ti @ Zamri Ahmad, PhD  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal Examiner)

Siti Zobidah Omar, PhD  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal Examiner)

Carolyn Calloway-Thomas, PhD  
Associate Professor  
Graduate School  
Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana  
USA  
(External Examiner)

BUJANG BIN KIM HUAT, PhD  
Professor and Deputy Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date:
This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

**Ezhar Tamam, PhD**
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

**Md. Salleh Hj Hassan, PhD**
Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Committee Member)

**Sarjit Singh s/o Darshan Singh, PhD**
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Human Ecology
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Committee Member)

---

**HASANAH MOHD. GHAZALI, PhD**
Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 12 August 2010
DECLARATION

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

JAMES KUAKE BENG MUN (GS15690)
Date: 16 June 2010
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRAK (in Bahasa Malaysia)</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPROVALS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPROVAL BY (Examination Committee)</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPROVAL BY (Supervisory Committee)</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</td>
<td>xxi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

1. **INTRODUCTION**  
   1. Background of Research  
   1. Background of Problem  
   1. Problem Statement  
   1. Research Objectives  
   1. Justification of Research  
   1. Scope and Limitations of Research

2. **LITERATURE REVIEW**  
   20. Communication and Culture  
   27. Culture is Learnt  
   29. Cultural Identity  
   33. Transmission of Culture  
   37. Transmission of Culture and Enculturation  
   39. Theoretical Framework  
   40. Communication Theory of Identity  
   46. Origin of the Baba-Nyonyas  
   59. The Baba-Nyonya Identity  
   68. A Note on Baba-Nyonya Religion
Baba-Nyonya Names
Baba-Nyonya Material Culture Identity
  Porcelain (Nyonya-ware)
  Silver
  Baba-Nyonya Furniture
  Nyonya Beadwork and Embroidery
  Nyonya Cooking
Baba Malay Poetry
Baba-Nyonya Cultural Persistence
Fading of Baba-Nyonya Cultural Practices
Conceptual Framework

3 METHODOLOGY
Introduction
Research Design
Choice of Research Method
  Purpose of Descriptive Research
Conceptualization
  Concepts and Indicators
  Dimensions
Operationalizing
  Variables
Measurement of Variables
  Independent Variable: Demonstration of Baba-Nyonya Cultural Identity
    Measurement of Independent Variable
  Dependent Variable: Transmitting Baba-Nyonya Culture
    Measurement of Dependent Variable
  Moderator Variable: Age of the Respondents
Location of Research
Population and Sampling
Unit of Analysis
Research Instrument
Observations
  Reporting Scores by Levels of Low, Medium and High
Data Collection Procedure 125
Data Processing 126
Pre Test 129
Outcome of Pre Test 129
Reliability of Items Used in Analysis 130

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION 132
Profile of the Respondents 132
Origin/locality and Gender 133
Age 134
Exploratory Data Analysis 138
Demonstrating Baba-Nyonya Cultural Identity (Independent Variable) 142
Practicing the Baba-Nyonya Culture 143
 Use of Baba Malay 151
Wearing Traditional Baba-Nyonya Clothes/jewelry 154
Cooking/serving Nyonya Food 158
Engaging in Traditional Baba-Nyonya Pastime Activities 161
Observing Baba-Nyonya Traditions and Taboos 165
Celebrating Family Occasions the Baba-Nyonya Way 169
Possessing Baba-Nyonya Cultural Artifacts (Material Culture) 172
Possessing Mindset as Baba-Nyonya 177
Transmitting Baba-Nyonya Culture (Dependent Variable) 184
Relationship between Practicing the Baba-Nyonya Way of Life and Effort to Transmit the Culture to the Next Generation 192
Relationship between the Possession of Baba-Nyonya Material Culture and Effort to Transmit the Culture to the Next Generation 199
Relationship between Possessing Mindset as Baba-Nyonyas and Effort to Transmit the Culture to the Next Generation 203
Overall Relationship between Demonstration of Baba-Nyonya Way of Life and Transmission of the Culture 206

Contribution of Demonstration of Baba-Nyonya Cultural Identity to the Transmission of Their Culture 208

Some General Reasons for the Decline of Baba-Nyonya Culture 212

Role of Elders 212
Contact with Elders 213
Relevance of Baba-Nyonya Cultural Practices 214
Influence of Other Cultures 214

5 SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH 216

Summary of Research 216
Problem Statement 213
Research Objectives 219
Research Methodology 221

Summary of Findings 223
Practicing Baba-Nyonya Way of Life 223
Possessing Baba-Nyonya Cultural Artifacts (Material Culture) 224
Possessing Mindset as Baba-Nyonya 224
Transmitting Baba-Nyonya Culture 225
Relationship between Demonstrating Baba-Nyonya Way of Life and Effort to Transmit Their Culture 226

Conclusion and Implications of Research 227
Theoretical Implications 228
Methodological Implications 231
Practical Implications 233

Suggestions Arising from this Research 237
Promote the Use of Baba Malay 238
Promote Traditional Baba-Nyonya Pastime Activities 238
Reenact Traditional Baba-Nyonya Rituals 239
Use Other Research Methods to Study this Topic 239

Suggestions for Further Research 240
Segment the Research by Locality 240
Study Baba-Nyonyas in Kuala Lumpur 243
Segment the Research by Parentage 243
Segment the Research by Marriage 244
Segment the Research by Religion 245
Study Baba-Nyonyas in Phuket and Myanmar 245
Study the Role of the Internet in Preservation of the Baba-Nyonya Culture 246
Study Contemporary Relationship between Baba-Nyonyas with the Chinese and Malays 246

REFERENCES 247

APPENDICES
A Research Instrument 257
B Additional Tables 263
C Terminologies 276

BIODATA OF STUDENT 281