



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**COMMUNICATING THE BABA-NYONYA CULTURAL IDENTITY**

**JAMES KUAKE BENG MUN**

**FBMK 2010 33**

**COMMUNICATING THE BABA-NYONYA CULTURAL IDENTITY**

**By**

**JAMES KUAKE BENG MUN**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, University Putra Malaysia,  
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**June 2010**

## 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,

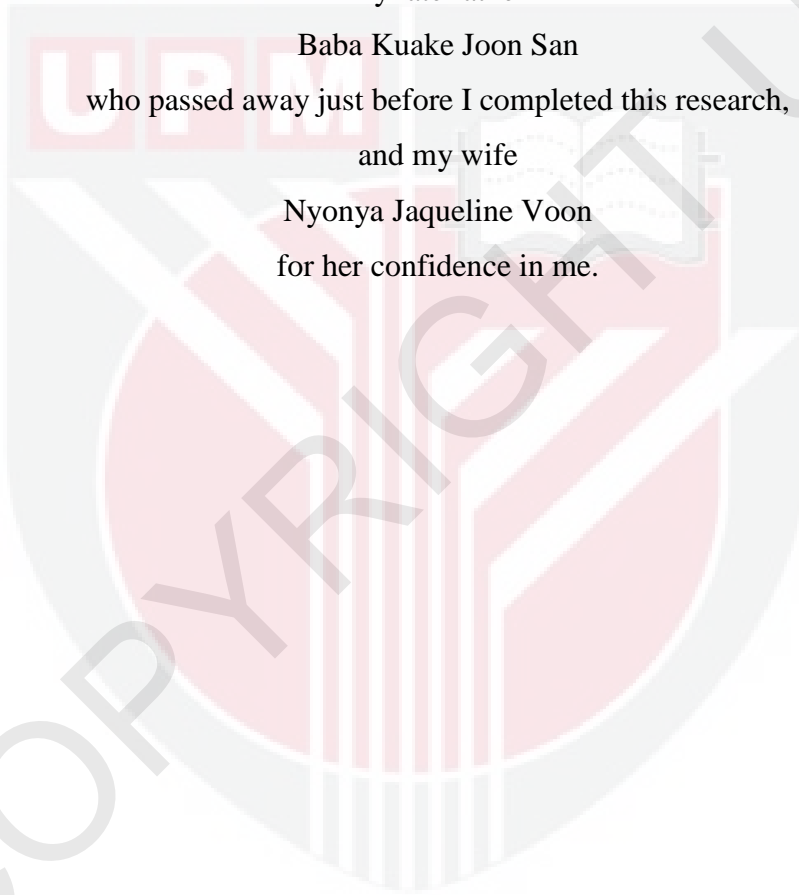
and my wife

Nyonya Jaqueline Voon

for her confidence in me.



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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

21<sup>st</sup> Annual Baba-Nyonya Annual Convention held from 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> 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

**MENGGOMUNIKASIKAN**  
**IDENTITI BUDAYA BABA-NYONYA**

Oleh

**JAMES KUAKE BENG MUN**

**Jun 2010**

**Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Ezhar Tamam, PhD**

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Komuniti Baba-Nyonya sering menyatakan tentang rasa kluatir mengenai pemeliharaan kesenimbangan identiti budaya mereka. Budaya Baba-Nyonya kini merupakan satu-satunya warisan Malaysia. Remaja Baba-Nyonya didapati kurang menghayati cara hidup budaya mereka.

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.

Sejumlah 314 responden telah mengisi borang soal selidik dengan lengkap. Mereka mewakili generasi Baba-Nyonya yang lahir dari tahun 1920an hingga tahun 1990an. Responden-responden terdiri daripada perwakilan persatuan-persatuan Baba-Nyonya

dari Pulau Pinang, Melaka, Singapura dan Kuala Lumpur di majlis konvensyen tahunan ke21, bertempat di Melaka pada 5hb hingga 7hb Disember 2008. Antara syarat-syarat untuk menjadi ahli persatuan-persatuan Baba-Nyonya tempatan, pemohon mesti sahkan bahawa mereka dari keturunan 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.”

Ujian korelasi Pearson menunjukkan perkaitan positif yang sederhana dan signifikan di antara demonstrasi identiti budaya Baba-Nyonya dengan usaha memelihara kesinambungan warisan tersebut. Analisis multi-regresi menunjukkan ketiga-tiga dimensi demonstrasi identiti budaya Baba-Nyonya menyumbang 51 peratus dari varians usaha memelihara kesinambungan warisan tersebut. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan pola kemerosotan demonstrasi identiti budaya Baba-Nyonya dan usaha memelihara kesinambungan warisan tersebut tetapi terdapat tanda perkembangan semula dari responden yang lahir pada tahun 1990an. Ini dapat dijelaskan oleh keadaan-keadaan tertentu sosio-ekonomi dan politik semasa ketika era tersebut.

## 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 post-graduate 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

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Date: 12 August 2010

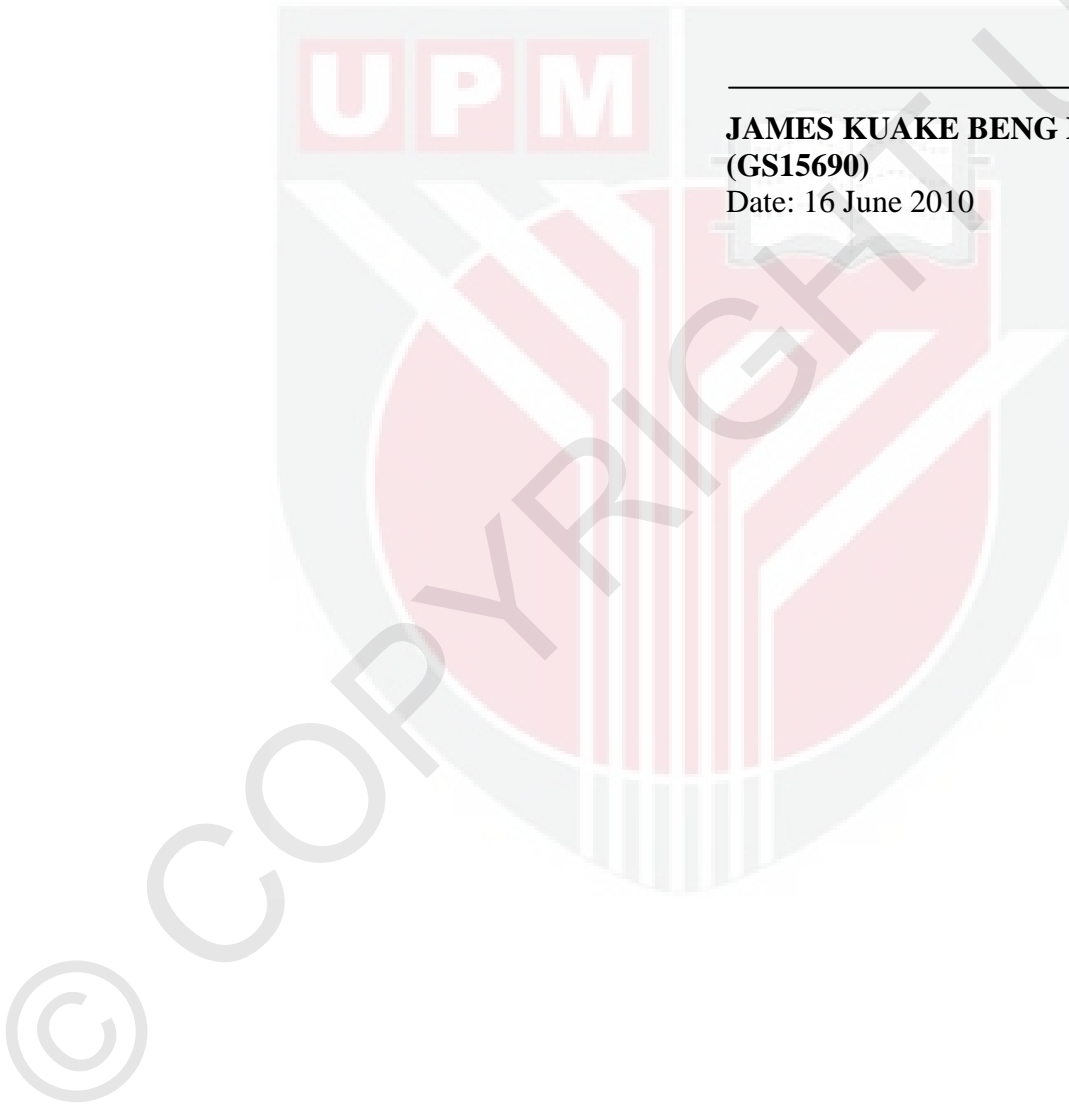
## DECLARATION

I 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, 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



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