

MALAYSIAN CHINESE ETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction

The Chinese are quickly becoming world players in areas of business, economics, and technology. At least one in five persons on the planet are of a Chinese background. Chinese are immigrating all over the globe at a rate that may eclipse any historical figure. These immigrants, known as overseas Chinese, are exerting tremendous influence on the communities they live in. This ethnography will focus specifically on those overseas Chinese living in urban Malaysia. Malaysian Chinese have developed a unique culture that is neither mainland Chinese nor Malay.

In order to propose a strategy for reaching them with the gospel several historical and cultural considerations must first be examined. This paper will provide a history of Chinese immigration to Malaysia, then explore the unique Chinese Malay culture, and finally will present a strategy for reaching the Malaysian Chinese with a culturally appropriate method. It will be demonstrated that a successful strategy will take into account the unique culture of Malaysian Chinese, including reshaping the animistic worldview, finding a solution to the practice of ancestor worship by redeeming the cultural rituals, and delivering biblical teaching through a hybrid oral/literate style.

History of Immigration

Malaysia has long been influenced by travelling cultures and neighboring nations. Halfway between India and China, Malaysia has been influenced by both. Historically, India has had more influence on Malaysia than has China. The primary reason is that the Chinese have

long been a self-sustaining empire, seeing themselves as the center of the world (zhong guo) and were not prone to long sea voyages. So, although China grew in power, much of the culture was contained within her borders. Meanwhile, until the 16th century, Malaysia was ruled by a series of kingdoms and empires. Control of the land and surrounding seas changed hands depending on who had the strongest army at the time. By the mid-16th century the strongest forces yet seen, the colonial powers, had arrived.¹ First came the Portuguese and then the Dutch, and finally the British at the end of the 18th century. Prior to, and then concurrently with, the advent of the Colonial powers, Chinese people and their culture began to trickle into other countries, eventually coming to Malaysia.²

Chinese trading communities began forming in Malaysian port cities. As long as trading prospered, the cities remained, though none grew large. Hundreds of years passed with little permanent Chinese influence on the indigenous Malay people. The tide began to turn when the British founded Singapore and the Penang region of what was to become Malaysia in the early 1800s. Industrial centers formed and the Chinese began immigrating in large numbers.³

The largest draw for Chinese immigration came with the opening of tin mines around 1850. The exploding popularity of canned food in Europe drove the demand for tin high. More permanent Chinese communities began to be formed as workers flooded in. At this time, unlike during previous eras, Chinese customs, religion, and language began to take root in Malaysia.⁴

¹Jaime Koh and Stephanie Ho, *Culture and Customs of Singapore and Malaysia* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 9.

²N.J. Ryan, *The Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore: A History from Earliest Times to 1966* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 4.

³Ibid., 121.

⁴Ibid., 124.

Just before the dawn of World War Two the Chinese found themselves flourishing on the Malay peninsula. Life was not to proceed smoothly for long however.

The Chinese population of Malaysia suffered extensively during the Japanese occupation from 1942-45. The Japanese performed the *Sook Ching* (purification through purge) where all Chinese males aged 18-50 were systematically rounded up. Each person was interrogated and all anti-Japanese elements were executed. Many thousands of Chinese men were killed, most of them without fair warrant.⁵ The Japanese were expelled from occupied lands after their defeat by the Allies in 1945. After the war many colonial powers began rethinking governing strategies with overseas holdings. Several powers backed out of the colonial game and turned government over to the local people. Such was soon to be the case in Malaysia.

Southeast Asia saw an uprising of Communism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, driven mainly by Russian influence on the new People's Republic of China. When Malaysia was formed as an autonomous nation in 1957, leaders were wary of the Chinese communist threat. Many Chinese were already living in Malaysia, though not a majority population. Malaysia's first prime minister thought he could integrate the Chinese population into the Malay majority by granting refuge for Chinese nationals fleeing Communist China and cracking down on the Communist guerrilla movement beginning to form in Malaysia. Communism was outlawed and with the help of British troops the communist insurgents were suppressed. Integration was not smooth, however, as the Malay government expected the Chinese population to take a substandard position to the Malay peoples. Malay was declared the official language and quotas were established to ensure that Malays would be hired for civil service jobs, given scholarships

⁵Koh and Ho, *Culture and Customs*, 18.

for education, and issued driving licenses over and above the generally higher educated Chinese population.⁶

Currently, the Chinese represent about 25 percent of the total population in Malaysia while Malays themselves constitute about 57 percent. The remaining population numbers represent a conglomeration of Indians, westerners, and other minority immigrants.⁷ Though officially still a minority, the Malaysian Chinese have begun to exert an economic and cultural influence on the nation. The next section will focus on elements of this unique culture that must be understood in order to effectively reach the Chinese population with the gospel.

Culture

Anthropologist Paul Hiebert identifies culture as “the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do.”⁸ Malaysia is made up of many cultures, the Chinese being just one of them. Even the Chinese culture can be categorized further based on sub-groupings of ethnicity. Chinese culture is complex so a few of the most important elements will be defined below. Missionaries would do well to learn as much as possible about these crucial keys to the lives of the people being reached.

Language

The standard language in Malaysia, *Malay*, is taught to every citizen through the educational system. According to an official policy passed some years back, other languages are

⁶D. R. SarDesai, *Southeast Asia, Past and Present*, 6th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 284.

⁷Koh and Ho, *Culture and Customs*, 3.

⁸Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 30.

discouraged from being taught and used. In reality many citizens criticize this policy and it is not strictly enforced.⁹ One can expect to hear a variety of languages being spoken, especially in major cities. The most common languages used are Malay, English, and Mandarin Chinese. Until World War Two, Chinese communities in Malaysia were fairly heterogeneous by dialect and kinship.¹⁰ The dialect spoken served to tie the immigrants back to the language source in mainland China. These ties allowed for the continuance of family relationships as well as cultural practices and religious beliefs specific to the region of China the people immigrated from.

Younger Chinese are beginning to leave their homeland dialects behind in order to function in the business world on a larger scale. The loss of dialect also weakens cultural identity with the home village and its customs as well as decreasing ties with mainland China as a whole.¹¹ However, with the rising prominence of China on the world scene, overseas Chinese may seek to renew ties with their homeland, though not necessarily with their specific ancestral village. The future of the Chinese language in Malaysia is uncertain. For the time being, the language is still prominent enough to impact other aspects of culture, as will be developed below.

Entertainment

Literature has a long and storied history in Chinese culture. From the sayings of

⁹Ronald Provencher, "Anthropology in the Malayan Peninsula and Northern Borneo: Orientalist, Nationalist and Theoretical Perspectives" in *Brunei and Malaysian Studies: Present Knowledge and Research Trends on Brunei and on Malaysian Anthropology, Mass Communication, and Women's Studies*, Vinson Sutlive and Tomoko Hamada, eds. Williamsburg, VA: College of William and Mary Department of Anthropology, April 1994, 55.

¹⁰Yow Cheun Hoe, "Weakening Ties with the Ancestral Homeland in China: The Case Studies of Centemporary Singapoer and Malaysian Chinese" in *Modern Asian Studies*, 39 (2005), 573.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 575.

Confucius to epic stories, not to mention Mao's Little Red Book, the Chinese have been familiar with the written word. Today in Malaysia short stories are especially popular. There are many magazines and web sites devoted to short moralistic and entertaining vignettes. Well known writers include Teo Huat and Liang Wern Fook.¹²

When the Chinese immigrated they brought along dance and theatre traditions as well. Chinese street opera is common in Malaysian cities and can be found in a variety of dialects. The operas are based on traditional Chinese classics such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms, The Water Margin, and Madam White Snake. Operas integrate singing, acting, and acrobatics and draw large crowds for evening entertainment.¹³ The operas reinforce historical events in Chinese culture and serve to bond modern people with a cultural tradition through operatic stories.

The Chinese bring a form of art that is common among their architecture. The 'Straits Chinese' style involves building homes that are narrow but deep. The distinctive feature is a pair of wooden half-doors at the main entrance, similar to saloon doors seen in the old American West. The doors are intricately carved and painted in gold.¹⁴ This style of building marks the Chinese community and often houses restaurants, another culturally important item.

Food

Chinese food in general varies depending on the region of China the cooks are from. There is no such thing as universal Chinese food. Interestingly, Chinese culture contains few or no dietary restrictions and the Chinese have always been known to be adventurous eaters.

¹²Koh and Ho, *Culture and Customs*, 48.

¹³*Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 82.

Typical fare includes white rice, soup, stir fry, noodles, pork, and seafood. Many Chinese frequent the street carts common in larger cities for a quick lunch during the workday. These vendors prepare simple items such as dumplings or steamed bread filled with vegetables or meat. The Chinese in Malaysia like their dishes spicier than the mainland because of the influence of Malay and Indian cuisine. One must have a tongue for chili peppers when eating in Malaysia.¹⁵

Family Life

Traditionally, Chinese maintain close family ties. Younger members are expected to financially support and care for older members. The Chinese New Year usually brings a reunion of extended family living in other cities. Overseas Chinese are often unable to follow the typical close-knit family structure found in China, however. In Malaysia, sons and even daughters often leave home in order to find employment, as business is not tied to a specific location as traditional employment like farming is. A Malaysian Chinese household will not be as large as in the past, as perhaps only a married couple will be living together with one or two children rather than the extended family network.¹⁶

Marriage can take on a variety of cultural forms. Usually, the ceremony leans towards typical Chinese culture, being a formal, day long event, with an elaborate dinner. Parents will meet months in advance to discuss the details of the arrangement, ceremony, and dowry. Wedding dates are often set on a lucky day determined by an astrologer. Sometimes there will be mass weddings on a particularly lucky day. The wedding day begins with the groom heading to the bride's house to pick her up, often at a time also set by an astrologer. He takes her back to

¹⁵Ibid., 99.

¹⁶Judith Strauch, *Chinese Village Politics in the Malaysian State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 79.

his house where an elaborate tea ceremony takes place. Successive cups are drunk to appease household deities and departed ancestors. The ceremony lasts well into the night and is accompanied with dancing, toasts, and extensive gift giving. Some modern wedding practices are growing more popular and some couples get married at the local Registry and forego the traditional ceremony and high costs involved. Family elders look down upon such practices though.¹⁷ As with the wedding custom, varying levels of tradition are found in modern religious expression as well.

Religion

Animism is the oldest strand of Malaysia's religious traditions. The indigenous People, as well as most immigrants, practice some form of animism. In Malay shamans are called *bomoh* or *pawang*.¹⁸ Many Chinese will identify themselves as Taoists or Buddhists but any distinction between those two beliefs and animism is often difficult to make. More often than not the Chinese will mix these more formal religious practices with local animistic practices. There are very small numbers of 'pure' Buddhists. In the past each dialect group built its own temple to suit the gods brought with them. Some of the more prominent temples still standing are Hengshan Ting (Hokkien peoples), Wak Hai Cheng Bio (Teochews), Haichun Fude Si (Cantonese), Yinghe Guan (Hakkas), and Tianhou Temple (Hainanese). Commonly worshipped Chinese gods are Guan Gong (god of war), Guan Yin (goddess of mercy), Dabogong (earth god), and Mazu (goddess of the sea).¹⁹ Whatever the temple attended or god worshipped, Chinese share in common the practice of ancestor worship. On important occasions and festivals

¹⁷Koh and Ho, *Culture and Customs*, 120-22.

¹⁸Ibid., 28.

¹⁹Ibid., 32.

offerings are made to the departed. In return, the ancestors provide protection and guidance for the living descendants. Ancestor worship becomes very prominent at the many festivals the Chinese celebrate. These festivals and their significance will be examined later in this paper.

One might think that the modernization of Malaysia, college education, and western influence would dispel animistic practices. In reality rituals are performed in order to bring luck and success to business ventures so that “[e]ven in the modern disenchanting world of capitalist enterprise and technology, the magical cosmos of Chinese religion continues to thrive as a compelling reality for the majority of its practitioners.”²⁰ Business deals will likely be made on days deemed lucky by a local astrologer or in correlation with the Zodiac calendar.

Home life continues to be influenced by animistic tendencies. One example is Zuo Yuezi. This is the practice of confining the mother in the home for one month around the time of child birth. The mothers are expected to follow the advice of the elders of the family for how to produce the best circumstances for the baby’s health. The women eat traditional herbs to regain heat and energy and preserve the Taoist balance. This practice can become a profession, similar to midwives or doulas and the professionals are known as pei yue.²¹

Malaysia is a Muslim majority country but most of the Muslims are non-Chinese in background. Immigrating Chinese are faced with the dilemma of identity. In order to belong to the majority, they must become Muslim. Converting brings certain social and economic benefits. As of 2000 there were 57,000 Chinese Muslims in Malaysia and more than 90 percent of them are recently registered converts. On the other hand, many Muslim Chinese that come to

²⁰Susan E. Ackerman, “Divine Contracts: Chinese New Religions and Shamanic Movements in Contemporary Malaysia” in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 16 (2001), 293.

²¹YM Chin, M Jaganathan, AM Hasmiza, and MC Wu, “Zuo Yuezi Practice among Malaysian Chinese Women: Tradition vs Modernity” in *British Journal of Midwifery*, 18 (2010), 170.

Malaysia decide to abandon their Islamic heritage in order to integrate with the Chinese community that provides the ethnic and cultural comforts of the home village in China.²² Islam is almost always folk in practice. Malaysia is strong in its Islamic identity and pressure is constantly put on non-Muslims to convert through propaganda and economic incentive.

As with Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam, Christianity struggles with syncretism in Malaysia as well. The colonizers brought Catholicism to Malaysia centuries ago but the faith never took hold in a pure form. Today, Catholics are known to sprinkle holy water around the house to keep evil spirits at bay as well as wear amulets of the Virgin Mary for protection. Christianity, comprising almost 10 percent of the population, is growing, especially among the younger population in Malaysia. Churches take on a popular western feel with electric guitars and high energy worship services.²³ Several seminaries exist in Malaysia, particularly the Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary, which has a partnership with The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the United States.²⁴ Even with these seminaries and churches in place there is still a great need for new works, especially those that are healthy and contextualized to biblically challenge the Chinese worldview of animism. The animistic worldview is most clearly expressed through the variety of cultural festivals seen in Malaysia and will be examined next.

Cultural Festivals²⁵

Festivals have long been an important component of Chinese culture. The festivals

²²Rosey Wang Ma, "Shifting Identities: Chinese Muslims in Malaysia" in *Asian Ethnicity*, 6 (2005), 90.

²³Background on Christianity taken from Koh and Ho, *Culture and Customs*, 39-40.

²⁴Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary website, accessed 4 June 2010, [Http://www.mbts.net.my/](http://www.mbts.net.my/); Internet.

²⁵This section is taken from Koh and Ho, *Culture and Customs*, pp. 132-37.

are a way to place emphasis on cultural identity, family ties, and respect for elders and ancestors. Several major festivals have carried over into Malaysian Chinese culture, none being more prominent than the Chinese New Year. The New Year is the most widely celebrated festival among the Chinese population at large. The celebration begins on the first day of the first lunar month, usually January or February. Families decorate their homes in red. All members of the family come home from various cities and have a reunion dinner. The New Year is a time when folk beliefs are most prominent, specifically those done to bring good luck and good fortune. Oranges are exchanged because the word for orange sounds like the Cantonese word for gold and the fruit is said to bring good luck. Red packets containing money are exchanged for good luck. Sweeping the floor is forbidden or else the good luck might be swept away. Typically, the Chinese New Year is a fifteen day festival and many schools and businesses are closed in order to allow family members to travel to their home cities for the celebration.

Another important festival is called Qing Ming, meaning clear and bright. Qing Ming is a day in April when Chinese visit the graves of their departed relatives. Food, drinks, and incense are left at the grave to appease the dead. Paper money is burned so that the money may travel to the land of the ancestors. This festival particularly highlights the essential ancestor worship and veneration component of Chinese culture. The entire family is expected to gather together and participate in the rituals. If one member refuses, the entire family fears the recourse of the angry ancestors. Such a stance makes it difficult for a singular family member to become a Christian and forsake the festival.

A third festival is the Dragon Boat Festival, which honors and celebrates Qu Yuan, a court minister in China during the 4th century B.C. Qu committed suicide by jumping into a river and drowning in order to protest corrupt court practices. To save the man's body from being

eaten by fish, his friends rowed boats into the river and beat the water with oars to scare away the fish. They also threw rice dumplings in the water to bait the fish. This legend is commemorated today with boat races and the eating of dumplings. The day is a fun time to get together and unite the community. There is little spiritual significance to this festival.

A fourth festival of note is the Hungry Ghost Festival. This festival offers insight into the afterlife of those who do not live in a pleasing way. Taoists believe the gates of Hell are opened and spirits are allowed to roam the earth. This festival is for condemned souls who have no relief from suffering. Incense is burned to prevent the ghosts from harming people. Operas are performed to entertain the ghosts and distract them from inflicting vengeance for their predicament. Hungry Ghost is the most colorful Chinese festival.

These festivals are very important among the Chinese community. Insight can be gained into the worldview of the Malaysian Chinese from observing rituals carried out during the festivals. For example, the New Year is a happy time when departed ancestors are celebrated. It is assumed they have moved on to a desirable place. The spirits still exert influence on the fortunes of the living community and must be appeased. As long as the proper ritual is carried out, the spirits are generally happy and pleasant. The Hungry Ghost festival functions for the opposite purpose. These spirits are suffering in the afterlife. Perhaps the person died a mysterious or violent death or was particularly vengeful in life. The spirits are not allowed to travel to the comfortable afterlife. These spirits seek revenge and harm when released from their prisons and appeasements must be made to avert their wrath. The festivals are closely tied with the culture and must be taken into consideration when developing a mission strategy that is to be effective.

Missions Strategy

Thorough cultural research is the first step to planting a culturally appropriate church. Many strategies center on where the church should meet, whether in a house, designated building, or outside, but in our case it is more important to understand what issues need to be overcome rather than the type of physical structure the church meets in. Malaysian Chinese have a drastically different worldview than do westerners. The most important component of the worldview is the animistic tendency played out in every day life, seen primarily through rituals done to bring luck and good fortune. The cultural festivals flow out of the worldview and are designed to appease departed ancestors and bring about a balanced world. Worldviews are made up of stories that explain reality. The Chinese worldview is reinforced through proverbs, short stories, and operatic epics illustrating the power of good and evil. The battle ground is described as neutral and appeasements can sway events toward a desired outcome. It is this aspect of worldview that must be challenged.

Spiritual Balance

Hiebert notes that “according to the biblical testimony, good is eternal and evil is contingent. The Bible is clear: God and Satan, good and evil are not two independent realities in coexistence from eternity The central issue in spiritual warfare, therefore, is not one of brute power. . . . At the heart of the gospel is shalom.”²⁶ The Chinese are locked in a battle to sway the powers that have influence over their lives. How does one begin to dismantle this worldview of deception? The Chinese are fond of proverbs and short moralistic stories. The literature and music show this to be the case. Stories from the Old Testament can be selected to specifically

²⁶Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 303.

demonstrate that God is the creator and Satan, along with his evil influence, is part of the creation. God and Satan are not locked in a battle. Satan only has power as God allows it. The book of Job regularly illustrates Satan's powerlessness compared to God. Biblical stories that explain creation and the power balance in the spiritual realm can begin to replace the faulty worldview of Malaysian Chinese.

The way Hiebert describes shalom is appealing to the Chinese worldview. True peace begins with a right relationship with God. Prayer and ritual in the Chinese worldview are done for manipulative purposes. Prayer in the biblical sense is showing submission to God and a reliance on Him (Mark 9:29). Shalom also brings about right relationships between people. Families operate in love and service to one another rather than in fear and control. Shalom is not broken because the spirit world is out of balance, rather, humans lack peace because they are out of balance with God because of rebellion and sin. Helping the Chinese to understand that manipulating the world of the spirits will not bring them true harmony and peace is a first step to introducing the gospel. Material gain will not bring balance and happiness to life either. The gospel is the only way to have reconciliation with the creator and within the society.

Redeeming Rituals

As stated above, the cultural festivals are the main system for drawing the Chinese together, reinforcing cultural heritage, appeasing the spirits, and satisfying departed ancestors. Physical objects play a large role in the ancestor worship rituals. The gravesite itself, spirit tablets, and offerings like incense, food, drink, money, and paper are used in the appeasement process.²⁷ The rituals themselves are intertwined with the other events they are associated with

²⁷Ian Clarke, "Ancestor Worship and Identity: Ritual, Interpretation, and Social Normalization in the Malaysian Chinese Community" in *Sojourn*, 15 (2000), 278.

like weddings, funerals, births, and house dedications.

Hiebert notes that westerners tend to be anti-ritual. Rituals are associated with dead churches or magical practices. In reality, many cultures of the world find meaning and expression through ritual and if the rituals are stripped away, nothing is left for the culture to stand on. When rightly understood, rituals can play a crucial process in transforming a worldview.²⁸ The Old Testament contains many rituals animists can identify with. Leviticus 14 describes a house cleansing ritual. Malaysian Chinese also practice house cleansing rituals. The key to a healthy indigenous church is working together with native Christians to assess the content of the rituals in light of scripture. Some rituals will surely fade away totally as indigenous believers are enlightened by the Holy Spirit to the evil nature of the ritual. Many other rituals may be able to be redeemed for true worship purposes. The Malaysian believers will offer insight into the contextualization process that is beyond what this ethnography can predict ahead of time. The important point is for the missionary to enter the culture understanding the worldview, understanding that rituals are not inherently evil, and that there needs to be input from the Malaysian believers.

Such cooperation can help alleviate the alienation that occurs when a believer breaks away from the family identity and practice of ancestor worship. Christianity has typically condemned ancestor worship outright, causing tension in families. The majority of Christian Chinese do not practice formal appeasement rituals any longer but many have begun to Christianize more ambiguous rituals. The ritual is reinterpreted as being cultural rather than religious. This practice allows the Christian to remember the dead, similar in significance to

²⁸Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 323.

placing flowers on the grave of a loved one in the west.²⁹ One must be cautious of syncretism and the author recommends that if a graveside ritual is practiced, the believer must make clear he or she is honoring the ancestor before God rather than to appease the departed soul.

In summary, finding a way to deal with ancestor worship is crucial to having a pure church among the Chinese. The visible rituals flow out of the unseen and underlying worldview which explains life as a battle for balance and success in the spiritual realm. The key to changing the worldview is to introduce biblical stories that rightly explain the state of man and the need for a right relationship with the Creator. Malaysian Chinese are educated and are literate but prefer to reinforce their heritage and identity through short stories, proverbs, and operatic epics. These communication styles should become the vehicles for transmitting biblical truth in a culturally appropriate way.

Conclusion

The Chinese population in Malaysia has become an integral component of the community. Chinese contribute to the economic, religious, and cultural climate of Malaysian cities. The Malaysian Chinese have developed a unique culture that is neither mainland Chinese nor indigenous Malay. The distinct ethnic identities found in China have blended together as the Chinese population have had to unite in order to provide a new cultural identity as well as succeed on the international business scene. These modern Chinese are educated but still prefer to reinforce their cultural identity through short stories, poems, proverbs, and the street operas. These communication styles are the preferred method of replacing the animistic worldview of the Chinese with a biblical worldview that is contextualized. Successful contextualization will only be achieved through an indepth study of the Malaysian Chinese culture as well as gathering

²⁹Clarke, "Worship and Identity," 285.

insight from the Malaysian Chinese themselves. The resulting effort, with the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit, will be a uniquely Malaysian Chinese community that glorifies God through their faith, changed lives, and cultural practices.

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