



## **Sinophone Malaysian Articulations And Intergenerational Dynamics In A Malaysian Chinese Film: The Kid From The Big Apple (2016)**

*(Artikulasi Sinofon Malaysia dan Dinamik Antara Generasi dalam Filem Cina Malaysia: The Kid From The Big Apple (2016))*

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### *ABSTRACT*

*Transnational migration, a factor of modern cultural and social transformations, has induced profound changes in Chinese people individually as well as their family units. The migration process has inevitably brought about displacement of cultural identity which has profound influence on family life and structure. The Kid from the Big Apple (2016) is a Malaysian Chinese film that captures all the essence of the diasporic experience of a Malaysian Chinese family across generations, that also incorporates a transnational angle. Using concepts from Sinophone studies and Hall's theory on cultural identity, this paper aims to explore the ways the said film – The Kid from the Big Apple (2016) – visually represents the articulation of Sinophone Malaysian identity whilst also investigate the particular experience of being Chinese in Malaysia from the perspectives of an older and younger generation. Further, this paper also demonstrates the fluidity and malleability of Chinese cultural practices as practices that can be learnt or unlearnt through meaningful dialogue as well as openness to cultural negotiation. It concludes that the film provides a significant space to reflect on emerging patterns of intergenerational interactions in multigenerational Malaysian Chinese households in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

*Keywords: Malaysian Chinese films, Sinophone Malaysian, identity, intergenerational, transnational*

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## ABSTRAK

*Migrasi transnasional, sebagai salah satu faktor transformasi budaya dan sosial moden, telah membawa perubahan yang mendalam kepada masyarakat Cina secara individu serta kepada unit keluarga mereka. Proses migrasi ini secara tidak langsung telah menyebabkan pergeseran identiti budaya yang memberikan kesan besar terhadap kehidupan dan struktur keluarga. Filem *The Kid from the Big Apple* (2016) adalah suatu filem Cina Malaysia yang merangkumkan inti pati pengalaman diaspora sebuah keluarga Cina Malaysia merentasi generasi, yang turut mengandungi dimensi transnasional. Dengan menggunakan konsep daripada kajian Sinofon serta teori identiti budaya oleh Stuart Hall, kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka cara filem tersebut – *The Kid from the Big Apple* (2016) – menggambarkan secara visual artikulasi identiti Sinofon Malaysia, di samping meneliti pengalaman khusus menjadi orang Cina di Malaysia daripada perspektif generasi tua dan generasi muda. Selain itu, kajian ini juga menunjukkan sifat fleksibel dan boleh berubah bagi amalan budaya Cina, iaitu sebagai amalan yang boleh dipelajari atau ditinggalkan melalui dialog yang bermakna serta keterbukaan terhadap rundingan budaya. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa filem tersebut menyediakan ruang yang signifikan untuk merefleksikan corak baharu interaksi antara generasi dalam isi rumah Cina Malaysia yang berbilang generasi pada abad ke-21.*

*Kata kunci: Filem Cina Malaysia, Sinofon Malaysia, identiti, antara generasi, transnasional.*

## INTRODUCTION

As human mobility increases and become more diverse, increasing number of families are separated by borders and subsequently find themselves at the intersections of national and ethnic influences (Castle et al., 2013). Migration is a constitutive force in global change as migrants create diasporic public spheres that complicate theories that rely on the continued salience of the nation state as key arbiter of socio-cultural changes. When discussing migration, it is the young or new generation that become the agents of socio-cultural challenge and change, not the elderly. The new generation experiences and pushes boundaries, thereby producing change.

To Appadurai, modern day migration simultaneously produces cultural homogenization as well as cultural heterogenization (Appadurai, 1990). The resultant modern subjectivities are produced at the conjuncture of transported ideas, values, life styles, as well as everyday lives from their homeland and those of the communities they migrate to. Furthermore, Appadurai (1998) claims that electronic media, especially television, has been influential in terms of modifying cultural spaces and the cultural world. Everyday discourses are transformed through electronic media's ability to transform the sense of distance between viewer and event.



Like Appadurai, Stuart Hall's (1989) two pronged concepts of cultural identity explains that cultural identities are simultaneously stable and fluid. It is stable as cultural identity is formed through the routes of one's history, and fluid as cultural identity is constantly undergoing transformation through the encounter with difference. As such, Hall's definition of diaspora identities are oft-changing, transforming, absorbing and renewing. Though Hall's case study centers on the Caribbean and British Black diaspora phenomenon in the 1980s, such postcolonial experiences are shared too by the Chinese diaspora globally.

By extension, Hall's thoughts on cultural identities as targets of postcolonial subjects are appropriate in the case of Malaysian Chinese culture. As Malaysia enters into the third decade of the twenty first century, the current generation of Malaysian Chinese is in a perpetual status of looking for a cultural and national identity that can be called Malaysian Chinese or a Sinophone Malaysian identity. As such, it is not peculiar then that this particular awareness of being Malaysian Chinese has been more explicitly represented in films in the most recent decade.

"Culture is produced with each generation; we reproduce our own identities in the future rather than simply inherit them from the past. Of course, we make them in the future, out of the past" (Paul, 2005). While the pre-migration past of Chineseness can be a source of reference, current diasporic Malaysian Chinese positionality invariably must be in conversation with the present and future. As such, using Hall's lens on the diversity of diaspora – in this case the Malaysian Chinese diaspora – in this paper, the analysis will reflect on the complex interplay between the heritage of the culture of the older generation Malaysian Chinese and the experiences of adaptation of the younger, also transnational, generation in order to demonstrate how Malaysian Chinese culture is in a perpetual status of formation from one generation to another. To do so, this paper aims to explore the ways a selected Malaysian Chinese family film – *The Kid from the Big Apple* (2016) (henceforth *TKFBA*) – visually represents the manifestations of Malaysian Chinese identity or, also known as, Sinophone Malaysian identity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## FAMILY, INTERGENERATIONAL DYNAMICS AND FILM AS A MEDIUM FOR MEANING MAKING AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

As the basic social unit of society, family is a microcosm of culture and operates as a space through which social structures and values, practices and beliefs are maintained or negotiated over time. It is through the family that resources and capital are exchanged between generations, and the space where values and norms are transmitted or negotiated intergenerationally.

For social and cultural transmission of values, it is important to take into account emotional and relational aspects. That is to say, socialisation is not merely a set of rational transactions, but is enmeshed with less tangible influences such as emotions, identities,



expectations and values that structure and underpin intergenerational relationships and dynamics (James, 2013). Therefore, in order to make meaning of socio-cultural continuity or change over time, it is necessary to pay attention to the narratives about everyday family life to demonstrate the ways the characters relate to each other, showing how they feel and the ways they make sense of the possibilities of their given social contexts.

As Gledhill states, “Home is where the heart is” (1987). It goes without saying that the family space is closely related to emotional ties, which transcends one’s place of residence. Being the most significant social unit, the fictional families in films provides the window to study the intersections of ethnicity, culture and identity. In this regard, Malaysian Chinese films that showcase the family experience across generations will be a most suitable medium to investigate and make meaning of intergenerational negotiations and tensions, which would allow for the reflection of the wider processes of social changes playing out within families and society at large.

The choice of investigating Malaysian Chinese family in films mainly has to do with the fact that Malaysian Chinese family life has been increasingly represented in Malaysian films in the past ten years (IMDb, 2020). As alluded above, the rapid increase in people’s transnational mobility has had significant impact on family life and this phenomenon is also true of diasporic Chinese families, Malaysian Chinese families included. Transnational migration has induced profound changes in Chinese people individually as well as their family units, in the sense that the migration process has inevitably brought about displacement of cultural identity which has profound influence on family life and structure. It is not unusual to find grandparents and grandchildren located in different countries across different time zones.

Kinship is an issue of universal relevance and families in many different countries share common elements. Notwithstanding this, family structures, values and beliefs concerning marriage and family life are always culturally specific (Netting, Wilk and Arnould, 1984). When the family unit and its members experience transnational migration, these intergenerational negotiations come into sharp focus. In the context of transnational migration, families in general are transformed in more complex and unpredictable ways (Hjorth, Ohashi, Sinanan, et. al., 2020). It is in this regard that films involving transnational Malaysian Chinese families have come to play an important role in depicting cultural tensions, ambivalence, negotiations and cohesion that take place intergenerationally within the Malaysian Chinese family context. By utilizing the cinematic form of family films, the complexity within the family domain, where diverse forms of conflict exist between generations, gender roles, cultures and nations, is brought into focus.

## CONFUCIAN INFLUENCE ON CHINESE FAMILIES

In contrast with Euro-American societies, Chinese familial and intergenerational relationships used to be structured in accordance with Confucian ideals. Confucian tradition



supported gender and generational hierarchy as the principal category that defined the structure of a patriarchal family and the ways it functioned. Family hierarchy denotes the respect and devotion of the child to the elders. Differential family status and roles of men and women are regarded as essential within families so as to maintain family harmony. The traditional Chinese family exhibit a strong hierarchical order whereby children were raised to practice filial piety towards their parents, family roles were gendered and embedded in a male kinship network. Essentially, the ideal traditional family was “patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal” (Johnson, 1985). Confucian ideal valorises the primacy of family interests as a collective unit over the interests of individual family members, and thus is positioned as antithetical to individualism. These virtues and morals have greatly influenced Chinese populations and its diaspora, including the Malaysian Chinese diaspora, for generations and generations.

Descending from common ancestral and Confucian origins, Malaysian Chinese families continue to place significant emphasis on the role of family obligations although economic, social and cultural changes modify the expectations and attitudes through which such obligation operates. By analysing the dimensions of power in the intergenerational dynamics as depicted in the selected film, this paper will trace any transformation in the power relations between the grandparent, adult-child and grandchild in the intergenerational collaboration in this new millennium.

#### MALAYSIAN CHINESE DIASPORIC FAMILIES AS REPRESENTED IN FILMS

Malaysia is home to Southeast Asia’s largest ethnic Chinese population standing at approximately 6.86 million people as at January 2023 (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal). Correspondingly, throughout Southeast Asia, Malaysia produces the highest number of Chinese language feature films each year. According to records in FINAS, in 2019, the country produced about 20 Chinese language films (FINAS, n.d.). Unsurprisingly, Malaysian Chinese films usually revolve around the stories of the local Chinese community whereby family, comedy, romance and horror are among the popular genres.

As traced from Imdb.com website, since 2000, more than 100 titles of Malaysian Chinese films have been produced and released in the domestic and international market, making Malaysia one of the countries in Southeast Asia that produces one of the most Chinese language films each year (IMDb, 2020). With a sizeable repertoire of Malaysian Chinese films, it is timely to study one of these films as spaces to reflect on Sinophone Malaysian articulations in an intergenerational household, and analyse the transformation the main characters undergo as the older and younger characters navigate cultural and communication barriers as well as generational differences between them.

In an overview of Malaysian films from the post-independence period onwards, one will find that Malaysian Chinese representations rarely appear as a family. It was not until the new millennium that a large number of films have been produced by ethnic Chinese filmmakers to expand the visibility of Malaysian Chinese community and to capture the Malaysian Chinese family on the silver screen. This generation of filmmakers and artists combined both the



cultural reference points from transnational influences and the local elements borne out of battling with elements of a multiracial, multicultural society in Malaysia into new forms of cinematic representation.

Different types of discourse shape the Chinese familial experience, and more complicated variants could influence the Chinese family especially one that encompasses a multicultural, multi-ethnic as well as a diasporic and transnational context. *TKFBA* is one such film that captures all the essence of the diasporic experience of a Malaysian Chinese family across generations, that also incorporates a transnational angle. Migration and digital communication facilitate mother and daughter, Sophia and Sarah, who return to Malaysia to rekindle familial relationship with their Malaysian father and grandfather respectively. Using concepts from Sinophone studies and Hall's theory on cultural identity, this paper aims to explore the ways the selected film, *TKFBA*, visually represents the articulation of Sinophone Malaysian identity whilst also investigate the particular experience of being Chinese in Malaysia.

#### CHINESE DIASPORA IDENTITY AND THE SINOPHONE

As Shih clearly states, "Sinophone culture is therefore transnational in constitution and formation but local in practice and articulation" (2002, p. 7). Based on this line of reasoning, through a close reading of the characters and narrative of the selected film, *TKFBA*, this paper seeks to explore the evolving articulations of Sinophone Malaysia identity from an older generation to a younger transnational generation.

In order to tease out evolving articulations of Sinophone Malaysia identity, this paper aims to demonstrate how a younger generation's lack of access to ethnic roots and identity being a subsequent generation Sinophone subject raised in America to Malaysian Chinese parentage could through interactions with her Malaysian grandfather come to acquire and embrace a hybridised identity that comes to constitutes a Sinophone Malaysian identity. The transformation from a lack of appreciation to the acknowledgement of one's ethnic roots and the acceptance of one's Malaysian Chinese identity suggests that identity, in accordance with Hall's theory, is always evolving, always becoming.

Further, this paper aims to reveal spaces where the film reflect on significant moments of intergenerational interactions wherein constitute moments of cultural contact and exchange which result in the negotiation and transmission of culture which contributes to the process of formation of a Sinophone Malaysian identity. By evaluating Chinese culture and practices using the concepts drawn from Sinophone studies and Hall's theory on cultural identity, this paper will analyse and expound on the selected film on the basis of a specific time period and place – that is in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur – as well as taking into account generational axis.

#### SINOPHONE ARTICULATIONS AND PATTERNS OF INTERGENERATIONALITY IN *THE KID FROM THE BIG APPLE* (2016)



*TKFBA* centres around the intergenerational dynamics between grandfather Lin and his granddaughter Sarah. Eleven year old Sarah, who is raised in New York City by her single mother, had to come to Malaysia to stay with her grandfather, whom she has never met, while her mother had to attend to work commitments in China.

The opening of the film depicts Sarah as an urban adolescent hailing from sophisticated metropolitan New York City – as the film’s titular name suggests – while grandfather Lin plays the role of a conservative and traditional elderly Chinese man living in a predominantly Chinese suburb in Kuala Lumpur. Sarah is introduced with long curly hair, donning a cap adorned with sparkly beads spelling the letters ‘NYC’ presumably the acronyms for New York City, dressed in stylish leather jacket and trendy boots to match despite the tropical weather in KL. Brightly coloured and decorated with stickers, badges and key chains, Sarah’s baggage can be likened to that of her character – her outlook and demeanour exudes a personality that is unrestrained and individualistic representative of a liberal Western culture.

Grandfather Lin, on the other hand, is introduced in his apartment from where he operates an oriental chiropractic clinic – it can be read as representing Chineseness and the practice of traditional Chinese medicine and culture. With a Chinese song blaring from the radio boxset, the camera closes into the house of which the mise-en-scene exudes an air of antiquity of one being brought back into the time frame of the early 1980s. A Chinese prayer altar, jars of traditional Chinese medicine lining the wall cabinet, Chinese characters and decorations in his house go to depict the image of a man steeped in a traditional Chinese way of life. Through the visual imageries of the vintage television and radio boxset indicative of appliances from the 1980s era, Grandfather Lin and his home represents the traditional character he upholds and the conservative backdrop of the space he inhabits. Symbolically, the vintage furniture represents conservatism as compared to contemporary flat screen television and modern stereo systems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The audio and visual imageries surrounding Grandfather Lin in the opening scene becomes the way in which both Grandfather Lin first engages with Sarah and a place where generational and cultural clashes are at its most conflicting points. As such, the film not only represents a space to explore the theme of generational conflicts where traditional values clash with modern concepts of individualism and freedom of expression, but it is also a space that juxtaposes traditional Chineseness against metropolitan transnational American youth identity.

Although essentially the film foregrounds the theme of Chinese culture and the Chinese family, far from a monolithic essentialised notion of Chineseness, the film’s opening clearly portrays cultural distinctiveness between grandfather and granddaughter. At the beginning of the film, the grandfather-granddaughter relationship is one fraught with intergenerational friction and cultural tensions, due largely to the different subjectivities as a result of the disparate social-cultural and geo-temporal circumstances in which the characters are embedded.



The discussion in this paper seeks to unpack the subjective experiences of being Chinese in different spatial, temporal and generational contexts and in furtherance to this, to examine transformation the main characters undergo as they navigate cultural and communication barriers as well as generational differences. Additionally, this paper also problematise Chineseness as an essentialised and fixed identity category, and in place, proposing instead that Malaysian Chinese identity be approached as an open, fluid assemblage of multiple Sinophone articulations that varies from one generation to another. Multiple scenes in the film reveal that whilst there are certain articulations that are stereotypical of Chinese culture and ways of being Chinese, Malaysian Chinese identity or Sinophone Malaysian identity, is a fluid identity category that is constantly in the process of becoming. As Shih states, “the Sinophone – as lived cultures as well as living languages and peoples – is spatially and temporally specific to different generations and in different locations” (2002, p. 43).

In the movie, Sophia was raised by grandfather Lin as a single parent. Flashback scenes reveal the strained relationship between Grandfather Lin and Sophia when she was a young woman before she fled to America. In a particular flashback to a scene in Sophia’s bedroom in 2004, grandfather discovered that Sophia was planning to elope to New York to live with her then boyfriend, Hao Nan, on the pretext of studying in America.

In that scene, Grandfather Lin was opposed to Sophia going abroad to further her studies. As grandfather belongs to the older generation of Malaysian Chinese strictly guided by traditional Chinese culture, the rigidity in his ways of thinking can be adduced in the rambling monologue :

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Grandfather Lin: | You want to study, can’t you study here?<br>Why must you go to the United States?<br>You’re Chinese, why must you study abroad in English?<br>The Chinese culture is deep and profound, the learning is never ending. |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

In the scene, Lin disapproved of Sophia’s choice of life partner in Hao Nan. Steeped in the notions of Chinese masculinity, he commented contemptuously on Hao Nan’s inappropriately long hairstyle as androgynous, neither resembling a man or a woman. In the heated argument, Lin reprimanded Sophia that she should never return to the family home should she decide to leave.

Sophia, then unmarried and pregnant, went against her father’s wishes and eloped to New York to live with Hao Nan, who pursues a career as an artist. In New York, things did not work out as planned between Sarah’s father, Hao Nan, and Sophia. Hao Nan eventually abandoned Sophia when Sarah was a new born, leaving Sophia to raise Sarah single-handedly.

The film started off showing Sarah and Sophia’s return to Kuala Lumpur in a symbolic homecoming for both mother and daughter that re-embed them in crisscrossing transnational and intergenerational social networks. Sarah meets with her grandfather for the first time in her teenage life and had to stay with him for the duration her mother’s business trip to China.



Thereon begins the intergenerational association between Grandfather Lin, Sophia and Sarah. During this time, Sarah is introduced to the multi-ethnic community in the suburb of Kuala Lumpur as well as socialises with the neighbourhood kids while maintaining relationship with her mother digitally through text messages and voice calls.

### DIALECTICS OF TRANSNATIONAL INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT

Consumption plays a key role in shoring up identity narratives, allowing individuals to display and perform identities with material objects. The consumption pattern at which Sarah was introduced provides visual, auditory and other sensory means through which Sarah understands and participate in American youth culture, and indirectly reinforces her separateness from Malaysian Chinese culture. In her interactions with her mother, Sarah speaks her mind freely, voicing her dissatisfaction and dissent at having to leave New York City, and having to relocate to Kuala Lumpur to stay with her grandfather.

The distance in terms of cultural and generational values between grandfather and granddaughter find expression in the different styles of consumption whether in terms of clothing or food consumption and in terms of common language of communication. Being raised as a Chinese in America, Sarah is a manifestation of several personas in one. Initially, she struggles with integrating herself in the Malaysian Chinese culture and finding herself caught in the contradictions between cultures and between her identities. Sarah's struggle is expressed by her indifferent and rude attitude towards her grandfather. Moreover, Sarah's refusal to communicate with her grandfather is indicated by the fact that she feigns inability to understand and speak Mandarin – the language intelligible to grandfather. The transformation of Sarah's identity into being more receptive of Chinese culture can be seen in later scenes whereby it was revealed that Sarah is able to communicate in Mandarin.

In the very first encounter with Grandfather, after greeting her own father, Sophia requested that Sophia greets grandfather by calling him 'Grandpa'. As Chinese culture is very much centred on the concept of respect by the younger towards the older, greeting an elder family member is a central part of Chinese and Confucian etiquette. To her mother's request, Sarah turns her head away in disobedience.

After her mother left for China, Sarah continued to disrespect Grandfather by speaking to him rudely in English and refusing to respond in Mandarin. As Grandfather tried to invite Sarah to use her mother's former room, Sarah ignored him by playing video games on her phone. As Grandfather tried to help Sarah move her luggage to the room, Sarah continued to show indignance towards his efforts thereby resisting spaces for intergenerational communication. With hostile mannerism, she remarked angrily:

Sarah :                Don't touch my things.  
                              Don't make me angry. You won't like me when I'm angry. I'm a hulk.  
                              Do you know what is hulk?! So stay away from me!



Thereafter, she proceeded to randomly enter a room and slammed the door shut behind her. As explained above, the traditional context of Chinese and Confucian culture dictate that the younger generation shall accord respect and deference towards their elders. When Grandfather enters the room to inform Sarah that her room is across the hallway instead of the one she is in, she pulled her luggage callously knocking into Grandfather's legs and the wheels of the luggage trampling onto his toes. Such dialogue and behaviour exemplified by Sarah is disrespectful towards her elders and is against the cultural expectations of a grandchild towards her grandfather.

The estranged relationship between the Grandfather and his Americanised Chinese granddaughter is evident in their disparate values and socio-temporal environment, informed by different cultures. While the beginning of the film depicts Sarah as closed off to intergenerational communication by refusing to respond to Grandfather in the common language, it will be revealed later in the film that Sarah is able to converse in Mandarin. This transformation in Sarah symbolically represent several significant meanings, which will be elaborated below.

At another instance, Sarah mocked at Grandfather for eating chicken feet as she breaks out in condescending laughter when Grandfather chewed the chicken feet and remarks that it is disgusting to eat chicken feet. Further behaviours that depict Sarah as trying to exude a sense of otherness is when she complains that the television has no colour and that it is boring. When her mother called from China to check on her settling in at Grandfather's, Sarah speaks rudely to her over the phone. She refers to Grandfather as a 'monster'. Collectively, these behaviours run counter to Confucian teachings and practices that place strong emphasis on generational hierarchy and respect to one's elders. Sarah's description of Grandfather eating chicken feet as 'monster' stems from her Eurocentric orientation whereby certain parts of poultry are not valued for consumption.

From the above, one can conclude that in Sarah's world, generational hierarchy and the power relations that accompanies that hierarchy is de-emphasised. It can be adduced that she was accorded tremendous space and freedom to negotiate with her mother on many aspects of family life whilst in New York. Hierarchical power in intergenerational relations only make sense to those who are familiar with the former family pattern and lived through such patterns in family life (Yan, 2021).

Grandfather Lin hails from the generation where the practice of patriarchal ideology and male dominance in both the public and private spheres are the central ideology. This can be seen midway through the film in the scene where he instructed Jia Bao, a boy from the neighbouring unit, to explain to Sarah the three crucial house rules that must be observed by Sarah when staying in his house. Firstly, that the younger generation must be respectful towards the older generation. Secondly, girls must dress appropriately, which in the traditional sense means that tops must not be overly revealing and that bottoms or shorts must not overexpose. Thirdly, one must carry oneself with self-discipline and good mannerisms in behaviour. As Sarah tends to wear sleeveless tops and hotpants, this contrasted with the ideas held by Grandfather on what counts as suitable clothing styles for girls her age, suggesting that the



intergenerational conflict is in line with an ongoing process of social change in the younger generation.

Rather than fixating on identities being bounded by place, identities are in a process of perpetual transformation that makes use of circumstances one is embedded in. Cultural negotiation occurs when a range of cultural practices are drawn upon and reconfigured in response to time, place and circumstance. In this respect, the family is a primary site for cultural negotiation, whereby cultural practices are negotiated both by the older and younger generation in response to everyday interaction. In a diasporic transnational context, the family mediates cultural identities by negotiating between members, generations and places.

#### FROM RESISTANCE TO ACCULTURATION TO SINOPHONE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCES

The continuous evolution of Sinophone articulations from one generation to another is illustrated lucidly in the film *TKFBA*. From initial resistance and disrespect towards Grandfather Lin, the everyday intergenerational engagement and interaction that Sarah experiences in Kuala Lumpur have gradually influenced her to be more receptive to the cultural environment around her and the ways of being Chinese in Malaysia. In the beginning, Sarah rejected Chinese food such as Chinese sausages and Chinese style fried egg, lamenting that it is not the Western style sausages and egg fried sunny side up that she was exposed to in New York.

As the narrative progresses, a process of transformation occurs. Moments of meaningful dialogue and negotiations between the two generations aided in the bridging of the cultural differences between two generations. Taking on the advice of the neighbour to narrow the generational differences between himself and Sarah, Grandfather decided to make the first move. He brought Sarah and three other kids from the neighbouring units to lunch at McDonald's – a fast food chain from the United States. Seeing that Grandfather is making efforts to understand her, Sarah began to open up to him. She revealed that she is able to understand and conversing in Mandarin. In another scene, Sarah took an interest to learn and accept Malaysian Chinese food as she tried Hokkien fried noodle with Grandfather. As a form of ethnic dish, Hokkien noodles are yellow noodles fried with black soy sauce and is normally served with pork, fish cake, shrimp and vegetables. Hokkien noodles originate from Fujian province in China, and have become a common noodle dish in Malaysia in the variegated localised version.

Instead of using fork and spoon to consume the noodles, Sarah requested for chopsticks and Grandfather immediately changed the eating utensils. Symbolically, fork and spoon are representative of Western culture while chopsticks are stereotypically Chinese utensils, and is an important symbol of Chinese characteristics. Sarah's proficiency at using the chopsticks is an indication of some knowledge of Chinese culture which she has learnt and practised in America. This moment marks a sharp turn in the narrative whereby from this moment on, Sarah



became more receptive to revealing aspects of Chinese culture and practices that she has been exposed to in America, the articulation of which she was diametrically opposed to prior to this. The imageries of Hokkien noodles and chopsticks are significant to demonstrate food as a space for intergenerational negotiation and communication as well as the gradual reception of Sarah towards her Chinese identity in the form of Sinophone Malaysian articulations.

In the second half of the film, Sarah's character undergoes further transformation whereby she becomes more receptive to the everyday people as well as the Sinophone Malaysian culture around her. Instead of a resistant teenager who bemoans her circumstances, Sarah transforms into a bubbly and cheerful girl. In the scene where she accompanies Grandfather to breakfast at a local coffee shop, Sarah learns about Malaysian Chinese breakfast of kaya toast and semi raw eggs. Kaya toast is a dish consisting of two slices of toast with butter and kaya. Kaya spread is a coconut based jam. It is believed that Hainanese immigrants created the kaya toast as a replacement for Western fruit jams as coconut is abundant in tropical Malaysia. Kaya toast is commonly served alongside soft boil eggs and coffee and has become integrated into the Malaysian coffee shop culture. These scenes of Sarah and Grandfather sharing meals at a Malaysian coffee shop depict Sarah's gradual acculturation into Sinophone Malaysian culture through food.

Further, in terms of language and communication, at this point of the film, Sarah is more receptive to using Mandarin to communicate with her grandfather. For the first half of the film, Sarah chose to close off communication with Grandfather. Towards the middle of the film, further transformation occurred whereby both grandfather and granddaughter are in the stage that concerns the process of coming to terms with each other's differences. This stage enables social and emotional bonds to be established between the two generations. This is marked by Sarah becoming more receptive towards her grandfather and opening up to him as she starts to use kinship terms such as *kong kong* to greet him.

In another scene, Sarah learns calligraphy from Grandfather. Sarah writes her Chinese name in Chinese character using brush and ink. Compared to the beginning of the film where Sarah was oppose to various forms of Chinese culture, as intergenerational communication between grandfather and granddaughter improves, Sarah begins to learn more about Chinese culture and practices. Towards the later part, Sarah is an active participant to the various and diverse ways of being Chinese. In this sense, the film provides the space that demonstrates the significance of respective local societies in the shaping of the experience and identification of diasporic Chinese whereby culture may signify something slightly different in different local contexts. As Tan Chee Beng states,

The people of Chinese descent identify closely with their respective motherlands – the countries where they are born and which they are citizens of. Their identities are shaped by the experience of living in the respective national societies. The subjective experience of Chinese Malaysian are obviously different from the Chinese Americans. (1998, p. 344)



In terms of language, *TKFBA* is clearly a Sinophone Malaysian production as it is peppered with complex language creolization. It is typical of Sinophone Malaysian cultural productions to often contain loan words, expressions and cultural features from other major languages and cultures that circulate in multilingual, multicultural Malaysia. The elderly characters in the film converse primarily in Mandarin interspersed with Cantonese, while the younger characters are able to converse in a mixture of English and Mandarin interspersed with Cantonese. At certain parts of the conversations, characters conveniently codeswitch to Cantonese or Hokkien, as certain Cantonese or Hokkien vocabulary could more aptly describes the situation. For instance, when Grandfather Lin addresses his neighbour, who is also the lady boss of the neighbourhood grocery store, he greets her as “Auntie Ming” in Cantonese, then the both continues the conversation in Mandarin and Cantonese and intermittently inserted a Hokkien word. Code-mixing between different Chinese dialects and the intermixture of multiple languages in conversations are very familiar conversational habits to Malaysian Chinese who are immersed in a multilingual environment.

In the scene whereby the neighbour kid named Jia Bao acts as translator between grandfather and Sarah, he explained to grandfather that his granddaughter’s name is Sarah. The way Jia Bao pronounced Sarah made it sound to Grandfather, who does not understand English, as ‘salah’ which means ‘incorrect’ in Malay language. This instance clearly reflects the localised identity of Sinophone Malaysians in adopting multiple languages and dialects in their daily conversations. An intermixing of multiple Sinitic dialects with other local languages and the resultant localised accents have created a creolized linguistic environment which make up the Sinophone Malaysian identity.

It is through Sarah’s return to Malaysia and the everyday moments of cultural contacts and exchanges with the neighbourhood community as well as the intergenerational interactions with grandfather that various aspects of the Sinophone Malaysian identity are delineated and inscribed. At the same time, all of these factors bring about the reinvention a Sinophone Malaysian culture and identity, which in itself serves as a reactionary force that deconstructs the fixed and essentialised definition of Chineseness. Making use of intergenerational bonds, the film’s producers incorporated a transnational Chinese identity into the everyday realities of a Sinophone Malaysian community as a means to showcase the malleability of cultural identities and the process of transformation in the production of a Chinese cultural identity unique to the Malaysian experience. In line with Hall’s theory that culture is produced with each generation, the transformation exemplified by both Grandfather and Sarah show that Chineseness, and its manifestation, is constantly being renegotiated through the social process of resistance and reclamation, contingent on its meaningfulness in different socio-temporalities.

As the movie progresses, Sarah begins to respond to her Chinese name, Xi Jia, instead of Sarah when being addressed by her Grandfather. Sarah learns to pray at the altar table, a ritual stereotypical of Chinese ancestor prayer rites. These transformations demonstrate Sarah’s ability to embrace her ethnic roots and local experiences with immersion in Chinese ethnic culture through everyday intergenerational interactions in a Sinophone Malaysian setting. What eventually evolves from the narrative is an inventive Sinophone Malaysian culture that



captures Sarah's lived experience with her Malaysian Chinese grandfather in her mother's homeland. Through intergenerational interactions and engagements, the film showcases moments of cultural contact and exchange whereby Sarah exhibits a degree of agency as an individual to select, construct and create her definition of Chinese cultural identity as an individual straddling two socio-cultural environments.

On the other hand, Grandfather Lin's constructed Chineseness in ways that relied somewhat on essentialized notions of Chineseness and Chinese culture that he learnt in his lifetime. The transformation exhibited by Grandfather towards the end of the film also reflected new and changing relationships to Chineseness that he had to explore through his growing relationship with his daughter and granddaughter who had the privilege of transnational exposure. Both main characters' identities as Chinese or more specifically, Malaysian Chinese were not tactically reproduced from generation to generation, but were continuously negotiated in relation to their own changing experiences. There were also outside influences that shaped their particular aspects of Chinese identity that the older generation chose to emphasize to transmit and develop in the subsequent generation, such as the ability to converse in Mandarin and the continuation of the tradition of using chopsticks. In this sense, it can be said that the older generation was easily able to interpret practices that were significant as representing the continuity of family tradition along with folding in new practices. Undoubtedly, contrasting cultural beliefs create cross cultural and generational conflicts within the family, yet on the counter side, they open the way to negotiation and compromise intergenerationally. This is in line with Ien Ang's idea of an uncomfortable position known as the "in-between" space because its very ambivalence is a source of cultural permeability and vulnerability which is a necessary condition for living 'together-in-difference' (2003).

## CONCLUSION

A major transformation recognised in *TKFBA* is the emergent trend of moving away from the classic type of patriarchy of male dominance in Malaysian Chinese families. *TKFBA* provides the space that foregrounds the role of women taking central stage in both the private and public spheres. The waning of patriarchy signals new developments in family structure and family life – a move away from patrilineality and patrilocal residence. This is evident in the fact that Sarah bears the surname of her mother, and resides with her mother and maternal grandfather.

As can be drawn from the above analysis, ambivalence pervades the daily life of transnational subjects within an intergenerational familial relationship. This paper's examination of ambivalent moments has much relevance in understanding the construction of Sinophone Malaysian Chinese identities across three generations. *TKBFA* showcases that the family is an important sphere of social interactions that provides the space for moments of cultural contact and exchange through which both the older and younger generations reproduce



and negotiate ethnic and cultural values. The film also reminds that generations often differed from each other in terms of the extent to which each generation sought to hold onto the habits of the culture of origin and the importance ethnic background play in identity reconstruction.

The film portrays how differences in terms of cultural values and beliefs may arise as a result of sociocultural, temporal and generational shifts. Further, the film demonstrates that to overcome such differences and to foster good intergenerational relationships, it was central to maintain open communication in order to bridge generation gap as well as provide opportunities for the younger generation to value the tradition of their elders. Of equal importance is the willingness of the older generation to understand the challenges faced by the younger in dealing with the multiplicity of forces that represent different values, norms and ways of living in contemporary society and to allow the younger generation agency to discover and construct their own cultural identity. Overall, the film provides the space for reflecting on new patterns of intergenerational interactions in multigenerational Malaysian Chinese households in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Additionally, *TKBFA* represents a Sinophone Malaysian cultural production which showcases the process by which Sinophone subjects learn about, negotiate, adopt and synthesize cultures and languages from their daily interaction and everyday realities; all of which leads to the assemblage of Sinophone Malaysian articulations and the resultant creation of distinct Sinophone Malaysian subjectivities that are reflective of socio-cultural realities of the time of their production. For the subsequent or younger generation, the ongoing influences of rituals and cultural celebrations on Chineseness is not directly linked to history and Chinese traditions. Rather, such practices are more closely associated to the bonding with the older generations of the family. Ultimately, the expression and practice of Malaysian Chineseness differed from one generation to another and were modified to suit new gender ideals and shifting generational values.



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