

# Negotiating 'home' and 'national identity': Chinese-Malaysian transmigrants in Singapore

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**Abstract:** *Part of the globalisation phenomenon involves an increasing number of elite transmigrants traversing national boundaries in response to the global demand for skilled labour while maintaining multifaceted social ties astride political, geographic and cultural borders, linking home and host countries together. As transmigrants 'live' in several communities simultaneously, their identities, behaviour and values are often not limited by location. Thus, notions of 'home' and 'national identity' are also being reviewed given the discrepancies between these concepts and locality. In this context, this paper explores questions of 'home' and 'national identity' among skilled Chinese-Malaysians working and residing in Singapore, portraying them as active participants of two (or more) countries. It focuses on their strategies and struggles in negotiating ideologies of 'home' and 'national identities' across borders in a setting of two neighbouring countries umbilically linked in a volatile political relationship. It further examines their degree of concern in the political affairs of both countries. Between 'home' and 'host', Chinese-Malaysians redefine their practices of home(-making) in relation to their national identity, drawing on the resources and resilience of familial ties, nostalgic memories and other practical lifecourse needs.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese-Malaysian transmigrants, home, national identity, transnationalism*

With the advent of 'global capitalism' (Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc-Szanton, 1994: 23) and the development of efficient communication and transportation networks, the ensuing 'collapse of time and distance' (Koehn and Rosenau,

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2002: 105) has propelled rapid economic, social and cultural interactions across international space, thus vastly altering existing social organisations (Pieterse, 1994). The increasing (but still selective) porosity of national borders has also facilitated the growth of globetrotting professionals moving from place to place in response to labour demands (Beaverstock, 1994; Findlay, Li, Jowett and Skeldon, 1996). Many of these are transmigrants who build and maintain multi-level diplomatic, family, monetary, religious and social connections across national boundaries, linking their host and home countries together (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton, 1992). By bringing multiple societies into one social arena, transmigrants 'construct and reconstitute their simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society' (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton, 1999: 73).

Such 'multifarious belongings' have caused many to question the relevance of nation-states in this era. However, even as Ohmae (1995) argues that the sovereignty of nation-states is becoming immaterial, Billig (1995: 8) reminds us that 'nationhood is still being reproduced'. In fact, nation-building processes may be intensified as nation-states compete to encourage transnationals to avow local fidelities whilst sharing universal values and lifestyles (Marden, 1997). As such, notions of 'home' and 'homeland' usually situated within nationalist discourses are being reviewed in the light of increasing transnational connections (Skrbis, 1997). This paper explores issues of 'home' and 'national identity' among a group of skilled transmigrant Chinese-Malaysians<sup>1</sup> working and residing in Singapore. The paper is based on material gathered through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews dealing with notions of home, national identity and political involvement in 'home' and 'host' countries. It concentrates on respondents' strategies and struggles in negotiating ideologies of home and national identities across borders in the context of two neighbouring countries umbilically linked in a close but unstable political relationship. We begin with a brief review of the way notions of 'home', 'national identity' and 'belonging' have been shaped in a globalising world.

## **CHANGING NOTIONS ON 'HOME' AND (TRANS)NATIONAL IDENTITIES**

In an age where transnational migration has become a common experience, notions of 'home' and 'homeland' have become increasingly ambiguous (Benjamin, 1995). Three decades ago, Relph (1976: 39) defined 'home' as the profound core of human existence where there is an 'attachment to a particular setting, a particular environment, in comparison with which all other associations with places have only a limited significance'. Inherently linked to place (Wikström, 1995), 'home' is an 'affective core' (Rapoport, 1995: 27), an emotional attachment to a safe, 'stable physical centre of the universe' (Rapport, 1997: 73) where one's individual identity and affiliation to a specific community is established.

More recently, a more itinerant view of 'home' has gained prominence over conceptions of 'home' that emphasise stability and embeddedness in a single place. 'Home' has become progressively more 'words, jokes, opinions, gestures,

actions, even the way one wears a hat' – that is individual habits, routines and idiosyncrasies – 'no longer a dwelling but the untold story of life being lived' (Berger, 1984: 64). 'Home' can also be likened to the 'body' since both function as portable repositories for desires, anxieties and personal memory attached to the self (Bachelard, 1969 cited in McDowell, 1999; Pallasmaa, 1995: 135). Therefore, Rapport (1997: 73) states that migrants can be 'at home in movement, but that movement can be one's very home'. Similarly, Chambers (1994a: 24; 1994b: 246–247) indicates that migrants' identities are 'formed on the move', their stories of 'stuttering transitions and heterogeneities'.

Feminist scholars have stressed that the home is 'a matrix of social relations. . . and has wider symbolic and ideological meanings' (Valentine, 2001: 63). Against the traditional view of the 'home' as associated with the domain of women engaged in nurturing and care-giving roles while embodying womanly virtues, they have also argued that the 'home' is also a form of patriarchal enclosure, and the site of violence, oppression and resistance. Often portrayed as the 'locus of love, emotion and empathy' nurtured primarily by women, the 'home' also functions as 'a status symbol of a man's worth' (McDowell, 1999: 75–76). Alternatively, women are often perceived to be 'out of place' when out of the 'home'. Among transmigrants for example, men often feature as entrepreneurs, career-builders, adventurers and breadwinners who navigate transnational circuits with fluidity and ease, while women are alternatively taken to be truants from globalised economic webs, stereotyped as exotic, subservient, victimised, or relegated to playing supporting roles, usually in the domestic sphere (Yeoh, Huang and Willis, 2000). Being at 'home' is hence constituted by a duplicity of meanings and is experienced differently by members of the same home (Valentine, 2001). In this light, while notions of 'home' become increasingly understood as mobile and non-place specific concepts, it must be noted that they continue to be gendered terms, where the idea of the portability of 'home' is construed to fit better with male rather than female pursuits.

As the notion of 'home' is perceived to be the 'cornerstone of a nation' (MacPherson, 2001: 132), changing senses of what constitutes 'home' and 'homeland' are integral to 'the development of national self-consciousness' (Barrington, Herron and Silver, 2003: 292). The formation of nation-states allowing the demarcation of political territories so that citizenship rights can be conferred on 'homogeneous' populations residing within specific boundaries (Marden, 2000) assumed the development of a national identity when individuals commit themselves to their respective nation-states and fellow citizens within territorial boundaries (Morley and Robins, 1993: 9; Faulks, 2000; Poole, 1999). A national culture nurturing one's sense of belonging is expected to grow in intimate association with the country, now recreated as a 'homeland' (Anderson, 1991; Munch, 2001; Turner, 1997). Citizens are hence expected to possess a national identity which

involves being situated physically, legally, socially, as well as emotionally: typically, it means being situated within a homeland, which itself is situated within the world of nations (Billig, 1995: 8).

In this light, the increased pace and density of transnational migration and the burgeoning number of ‘people who are in transit, whose identities are unfixed, destabilized and in the process of changing’ (McDowell, 1999: 205) pose major challenges to nation-building today (Castles, 2000; Garcia, 1996; Smith, 1993). As van der Veer (1995: 6) puts it,

[n]ationalism is a discourse that depends on notions of space, of territory. Outsiders do not belong, are not rooted in the soil, and indeed have immigrated from outside.

One response on the part of nation-states in confronting the ‘transgressive fact’ of migration (van der Veer, 1995) is through selective offers of citizenship and assimilating immigrants into the national culture (Wihtol de Wenden, 1994). For example, France’s post-World War II endeavours in converting foreigners into French nationalities did work for at least two generations (Scnapper, 1996). However, offering citizenship as a naturalisation tool has become less effective with the current increase in the transnational mobility of people everywhere. In an era of ‘portable nationality, read under the sign of “identity”’ (Anderson, 1996: 9), citizenship is becoming progressively separated from national identity and belonging. In the process, certain tensions have surfaced. On the one hand, a ‘more general sense of “belonging” to parts of the world other than one’s nation’ may be positively regarded as it supports one’s presence in other nations. In forming multiple national identities, it is thought that transmigrants will also be better equipped to withstand sometimes overwhelming social, economic and political pressures encountered in their daily lives. Engaging in transnational practices may result in

an institutional expression of multiple belonging, where the country of origin becomes a source of identity, the country of residence a source of rights, and the emerging transnational space, a space of political action combining the two or more countries (Kastoryano, 2000: 311).

On the other hand, subscribing to multiple national identities such as dual citizenships or dual nationalities<sup>2</sup> is also said to degrade nationhood to merely the possession of a passport, hence ‘cheapening citizenship’ (Labelle and Midy, 1999). With countries building ‘nationalist sentiments’ even more zealously in the face of the challenges of globalisation, transmigrants are often at the centre of identity paradoxes caught between the countervailing pressures (Glick Schiller *et al.*, 1999: 94). Indeed, ‘ambivalent allegiance and questioned commitment are defining features of transnationals’ (van Hear, 1998: 250).

Interestingly, how notions of ‘home’ and ‘national belonging’ relate to each other also have important bearings on transnational consciousness. Magat’s (1999) comparative study of Israeli and Japanese immigrants to Canada, for example, illustrates how different slippages between these concepts affect adaptive responses. For Israeli immigrants, their strong Israeli identity prevents them from contemplating the idea of establishing new homes elsewhere. In equating ‘home’ to ‘nation’, only Israel is the true home; having other

homes will lead to a fragmentation of individual selves. Japanese migrants, in contrast, can live comfortably outside Japan, form multiple homes and senses of belonging whilst retaining a strong Japanese identity because 'home' and 'nation' are less strongly conflated (Magat, 1999).

From being 'conceived in national and nationalist terms' and thus positioned within a limited territory (Chambers, 1998: 39), the concept of 'home' has become much more fluid for transmigrants. To further unpack the complex ways in which transmigrants negotiate ideologies of home and national identities across borders, we train our analytical lenses on everyday realities as experienced by Chinese-Malaysians living and working in Singapore.

## MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE

Malaysia and Singapore are two geographically adjacent countries sharing a common political history. After gaining independence from the British following the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945), Singapore merged with Malaysia to form the Federation of Malaysia. This union soon turned sour in the face of conflicting political agendas presented by opposing political parties. Lee Kuan Yew, leader of the People's Action Party then, wanted democracy and equal rights for every citizen while Malay factions insisted on special considerations for the Malay population (Turnbull, 1977). The ensuing ethnic violence and hostilities finally led to the expulsion of Singapore from the Federation and it became independent on 9 August 1965. Since then, both countries embarked on dissimilar political paths and political relations between them remain highly volatile, ranging from an uneasy congeniality to a more hostile competition (Lee, 1992).

Malaysia underwent a stressful period of decolonisation from 1945 to 1957 riddled with leadership struggles and concerns among the Malays over issues such as welfare, position and identity. Eventually, a government stemming from an alliance between political parties was formed (Cheah, 2002). This coalition, or the 'Bargain of 1957', secured special rights and political power for the Malays in exchange for non-Malays' right to citizenship in the new sovereignty (Khoo, 1999). Although postcolonial Malaysia is a multi-ethnic state (Table 1), it is ethnically divided with each political party championing the interests of their respective ethnicity – Malay, Chinese and Indian.<sup>3</sup> Each

**Table 1.** Population of Malaysia by ethnicity, 1991 and 2000 (%)

ETHNICITY	1991	2000
<i>Bumiputra</i>	60.6	65.1
Chinese	28.1	26.0
Indians	7.9	7.7
Others	3.4	1.2
Total Malaysian citizens	100	100

Source: Adapted from the Population and Housing Census 2000 (2001).

party represents a political culture with diverging 'attitudes, beliefs, behavioural patterns with regard to power, authority [and] political action' (Awang, 1992: 185). However, special privileges for *bumiputra*<sup>4</sup> remain the 'ground rule' of the political system under UMNO's leadership (Bunnell, 2002: 5).

Despite their privileged position, the Malays remained unhappy over "'non-Malay" threats and challenges to Malay rights and . . . political primacy' (Cheah, 2002: 106). Soon, the coalition government became fragmented, culminating in the May 1969 racial riots (Khoo, 1999). Consequently, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented in 1971 to promote *bumiputra* rights, eliminate poverty and lessen economic and social inequalities among ethnic groups (Awang, 1992). Immediately after its implementation, Malay unemployment rates decreased significantly but grew for non-Malays (Soon, 1978). Overnight, the NEP dichotomised Malaysia into *bumiputra* and *non-bumiputra*. In 1991, a slightly modified New Development Policy replaced the NEP but it persisted in favouring *bumiputra* in terms of education, employment, political power and wealth<sup>5</sup> (Ariffin, 1995).

While Malaysia is 'a nation still divided' (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2000), the persistent lack of desired progress among the *bumiputra* and difficulties in enforcing existing policies prompted the former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir to advocate a more meritocratic system since 2000. He hopes that this will make the *bumiputra* more competitive (*The Straits Times*, 2001g; Wikipedia, 2002). Nonetheless, pro-*bumiputra* policies have already generated hostile feelings towards the Malays among non-Malays, and also propelled their emigration overseas in search of fairer prospects for themselves and their families (Gunasekaran and Sullivan cited in Pillai, 1992). Besides the 150,000 Malaysians estimated to be residing in Singapore in the early 1990s, at least another 40,000 Malaysians had migrated to countries such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand between 1983 and 1990 (Skeldon, 1992). Most Malaysian emigrants are Chinese who are 'highly qualified and experienced professionals and sub-professionals', typically male with 'a tertiary education, in his mid to late thirties, has a young family, and in a middle or senior management position, with an average monthly salary of Rgt 2,000 and above' (Pillai, 1992: 28; Sieh-Lee, 1988).

Chinese-Malaysians, constituting about 26 per cent of the total Malaysian population, have preserved a distinct identity and culture (Freedman, 2001). Their sub-identities can be differentiated according to various dialects, for example Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew among others (Tan, 1999). Chinese-Malaysians have distinctive accents, diets, mannerisms and lifestyles. Most of them are also multilingual and can speak Malay, English, Mandarin and their respective dialect. Although many Chinese-Malaysians identify themselves as Malaysian citizens, most have never felt completely at 'home' in Malaysia given the discriminatory policies of the NEP which 'had the tendentious effect of provincializing Chinese, of putting them "in their places"' (Nonini, 1997: 207). Chinese-Malaysians are said to have developed a diasporic identity because of the hardening of ethnic differences and their second-class citizenship status in the land where they hold citizenship (Nonini, 1997; Ong and Nonini, 1997).

**Table 2.** Ideological framework depicting Chinese-Malaysians according to Hirschman's paradigm

Categories	Groups	Correlates	Ideologies
*Transmigrate	Professionals, skilled migrants	All classes	Economic self-interest, political security
Exit	Professionals	Upper-class	Economic self-interest
Voice	Opposition parties	Middle-class	Political democracy
Loyalty	MCA; Gerakan	Businessmen-politicians	Political/economic interests
Defiance	Aliran; Consumer Associations	Middle-class/poor	Social justice

\* This category was added to the original paradigm.

Source: Adapted from Yeap (1992).

Another recent study conducted by Freedman (2001) reinforces the diasporic position of Chinese-Malaysians, showing that there was little integration of the Chinese with the Malay population as evident from their exclusion from political institutions and policy-making.

Generally, Chinese-Malaysians have remained deeply disgruntled over discriminatory rules such as restrictions on the use of Mandarin in schools and other *bumiputra* policies. Though alienated, Dr Mahathir (1997: 5) maintains that they are still 'tolerant' and 'put up with a lot of things which such communities [including other races] do not put up with in other countries'. Nevertheless, there has been a range of responses that may be classified under four categories of Hirschman's paradigm (1970, cited in Yeap, 1992). Besides the 'loyal' citizens, some Chinese have chosen to 'exit' Malaysia while others join opposition parties to 'voice' their displeasures or 'defy' governments by joining other human rights organisations (Table 2).

Interestingly, the majority of those who 'exited' Malaysia continue to retain Malaysian citizenship and return regularly to renew social ties and/or passports (Tan, 1997). Tan (1997) argues that they fit the profile of transmigrants who venture overseas but maintain substantial multistranded social and economic linkages traversing geopolitical boundaries. Chinese-Malaysians' status as transmigrants is reaffirmed in Lam, Yeoh and Law's (2002) study on the nature of transnational family and social ties maintained by Chinese-Malaysians while abroad. In Table 2, Hirschman's paradigm has been modified to highlight this new group of transmigrants who continue to maintain ties with Malaysia even after their 'exit'. This behaviour is unsurprising as their diasporic position or 'inferiority' has probably prompted them to utilise various transnational strategies to acquire cultural, economic, educational and social capital.

Across the border, Singapore, while sharing various historical and cultural similarities with Malaysia, has adopted a different political ideology. The Chinese-dominant (76.8 per cent of the population) city-state actively promotes multiracial

meritocracy, an appealing political feature for Chinese-Malaysians seeking equality (Chua, 1997). Singapore tops the list of globalised countries by A.T. Kearney/Foreign Policy Magazine Globalisation Index and is often nominated as one of the best Asian countries to live in because of the first-rate infrastructure and high living standards (*The Straits Times*, 2001a). Singapore's currency is about twice the value of the Ringgit and its stable and progressive economy also spawns attractive employment opportunities. It is a competitive option for Asian talent *vis-à-vis* western countries (*The Straits Times*, 2001b).

Attracting skilled foreign labour is vital to the small, natural-resource-scarce city-state, as a highly-skilled human resource base is Singapore's 'key success factor' (Hui, 1997). The governing elite (e.g. Goh, 2002) has consistently reiterated the importance of attracting 'foreign talents' who are able to raise the country's standards in 'sports, music, the theatre, literature, the economy or politics' and are thus crucial to Singapore's ambitions to become a 'Talent Capital' (Lam *et al.*, 2002: 125). Generally, Malaysian workers, especially Chinese-Malaysians, hold preferential labour status in Singapore as affirmed by foreign labour policies that favour their admission by classifying them as 'traditional source workers' who are allowed to work in all economic sectors.

Malaysians generally share a social and work ethos similar to Singaporeans' and are seen to incur much lower economic and social costs. They have a less depressive impact on local workers' wages than other foreign workers do. Furthermore, the lack of visible signs of dissimilarity led Trade and Industry Minister Brigadier-General George Yeo to note the 'closeness' between both nationalities and remark on the ensuing difficulty in differentiating them (*The Sunday Times*, 2001). While exact figures are deemed to be 'confidential and sensitive' by the government ministry and not available in the public domain, it has been estimated that at least 60 per cent of Singapore's foreign workforce are Malaysians (*Malaysian Business*, 2002). Despite current retrenchments in Singapore, Malaysians prefer to wait out the bad times to eventually resume working and living there (*Malaysian Business*, 2002). However, the influx of Malaysians into Singapore, in time, may be reduced given that Malaysia has recently implemented numerous policies<sup>6</sup> in direct competition with Singapore.

Undeniably, bilateral ties between Singapore and Malaysia have remained unstable and troubled. Arguments between both countries over important domestic and ideological issues are a constant staple of the press in both countries.<sup>7</sup> For instance, recent discussions on water agreements have been hitting the headlines, with emotions running high. This is evident in the snide remarks issued by Johor MP Mohamed Aziz who 'suggested that Malaysia sell Singapore sewage, since it is already prepared to drink it, if it keeps insisting on negotiating down the price of water' (*The Straits Times*, 2002b). It is also common to read articles on the Malaysian media censuring Singapore over multiple issues (see *The Strait Times*, 2001d; 2001e; 2001f). While both countries know that they need each other given their shared history, geographical proximity and economic interdependence (Chin, 1992) and that mutual cooperation is necessary in order to tackle the challenges of globalisation and

**Table 3.** Residential status of respondents

Residential status	Number	% (of valid respondents)
P1	3	1.36
P2	8	3.64
Q1	75	34.09
Q2	4	1.82
Permanent Resident	109	49.55
Singapore Citizen*	3	1.36
Unknown <sup>#</sup>	18	8.18
Total	220	100

\* Refers to former Malaysians who have converted to Singapore citizenship.

<sup>#</sup> Includes respondents whose EP statuses are being renewed or as yet undecided.

terrorism (*The Straits Times*, 2001c; 2002a), squabbles between both countries unavoidably affect Malaysians, specially Chinese-Malaysians in Singapore. It is in this context that Chinese-Malaysians are compelled to negotiate complex identity politics as they attempt to sustain transnational lives across borders.

#### *Methodological note*

A total of 245 questionnaire surveys were distributed either manually or electronically between January and February 2001 to the targeted group of skilled Chinese-Malaysian transmigrants holding Employment Passes (EP) graded either P or Q<sup>8</sup>. During fieldwork, it became apparent that most Chinese-Malaysians holding EPs graded 'P' proceed to attain permanent residence (PR)<sup>9</sup> in Singapore swiftly and successfully due to the various schemes<sup>10</sup> offered as part of Singapore's liberal immigration policy for the highly skilled (Chiew, 1995). Chinese-Malaysian PRs were thus included in this study (Table 3). Nearly all the questionnaires were distributed at the Permanent Resident Services and Employment Pass Department at the Singapore Immigration and Registration building (Kallang Road) using the convenience sampling technique, while others were disseminated through personal contacts using the snowball method. Out of 237 responses received, 220 of them met the criteria for this study. 27 respondents with distinctive profiles (i.e. citizenship status and migration history) were selected amongst other reasons for further in-depth interviews via direct, telephone or Internet mediums to obtain more personalised testaments.

#### **GEOGRAPHIES OF 'HOME'**

Despite its increasing instability (as previously discussed), the notion of home continues to offer an important clue as to where the roots of migrants are anchored. For the Chinese-Malaysian transmigrants in this study, several themes – social relations, nostalgic memories, national identity and practical lifestyle needs – emerge as the defining features (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Respondents' notions of home

Home is:	Total	%
Social relations	75	34.1
Nostalgic memories	37	16.8
National identity	30	13.6
Practical issues	26	11.8
Others	9	4.1
Undecided	6	2.7
No response	37	16.9
Total	220	100

### *Home as social relations*

Over a third of the respondents from the questionnaire survey (34.1 per cent) define home in terms of social relations, namely family ties and social networks. This confirms the affective aspects of home mentioned by Rapoport (1995) and echoes Stea's (1995: 196) notion of home as a social, familial context due to people's desire to 'maintain cultural continuity' whilst adjusting to social change and physical movement. Reflecting the strong family and social ties that many Chinese-Malaysians continue to maintain in Malaysia while abroad, more than half of the respondents (53.3 per cent) situate their 'social relations' – and hence 'home' – in Malaysia. Clearly, home for this group of respondents is very closely tied to family relationships, implying that 'kinship is more desirable than nationalism' (Spivak, 1992: 773). The salience of the idea that 'home is where the family is' for Chinese-Malaysians who transmigrate also implies that home need not be perpetually fixed to a specific location, as present-day technology facilitates 'family reunification' quite easily. Matthew<sup>11</sup> (26, Engineer) shares this view,

I value the family unit more than the nation . . . I'll call anywhere home if that is where my family is. Having said that, with today's technology, I can simply hop on a plane and go places within a few hours. Video conferencing or whatever facilitate communication and reignite that sense of family togetherness.

A family-centred definition of 'home', as opposed to a place-based notion, can operate to both strengthen and weaken attachment to place. For example, family ties further reinforce transmigrants' attachments to their birthplace if family members themselves are still living in the same hometown where they grew up. As the seventh generation of a family that has maintained an unbroken presence in a small hometown in Malaysia, Baoling (25, Human Resource Manager) has understandably stronger bonds to her hometown than has Jonathan (40s, Academic) whose natal family has moved to other parts. A lack of continuity of one's family with the place where one grew up has introduced an important disjuncture between the social ties threaded into 'home' and the environmental familiarity that constitutes 'home'. Jonathan

describes this sense of dissonance, which he highlights in explaining his lack of attachment to Malaysia as 'home' despite continuing to have 'family' in the country:

I don't spend enough time . . . to really feel at home there [Malaysia] now but I think if I stayed long enough I would. It is just that I am never there for more than . . . the 2 or 3 days [visit] that's it. So, I never actually get to feel at home you see. And I think it doesn't help of course that my parents are no longer there. My mother no longer lives in the place where I grew up you see so where she lives is not the place I left. [It is] totally unfamiliar to me, totally different part of the country . . .

The breaking of social and familial linkages to a place which was once 'home' is one of the foremost reasons why some Chinese-Malaysians no longer consider Malaysia 'home'. For a substantial minority (30.7 per cent) among those who define a sense of 'home' by the thickness of familial and other social relations, the dispersal of their family members to other countries – including Singapore – and the formation of new family units during their time in Singapore have shifted the locus of 'home' from Malaysia to Singapore. Where familial and social ties continue to be strongly anchored in both Malaysia and Singapore, a small minority of respondents (6.7 per cent)<sup>12</sup> claim both countries as 'home', reflecting the possibility among transmigrants of maintaining ties with their homeland while simultaneously establishing new ones in the host country. The maintenance of these ties is also constructed on the basis of the gender division of labour in the household; often it is women who actively sustain the multi-local extended family situated in more than one country, thus tending to the needs of multiple homes. Tessa (late 20s, Teacher) describes the different roles her Chinese-Malaysian parents (both working in Singapore) played:

When my grandparents [in Malaysia] were sick, my mother will work in the day and take the night flight over to look after them and then take the morning flight back to Singapore. Before leaving for the airport, she will be worried that her children hadn't had dinner, rush home, and settle dinner before getting on the night flight. In contrast, my father never saw the need to do all these. He often says stuff like 'I can't go back to see my sick mother because I need to work' or 'My situation is such that I can't fly back to see her . . . but with the money I save on travelling, I can employ a maid to look after her, pay her medical bills and buy her good food before she dies. In the period of one and a half years when she was critically ill, he visited her only once!

As such, the multiple needs of different homes are met by women stretching their resources through transborder mobilities, putting a different spin not so much on the stability of the notion of home, but on the idea of mobility. While the literature often conceives of men on the move as risk-takers carving out new careers and other avenues, transnational mobility when undertaken by women may not be associated with emancipatory notions but with the maintenance of 'home.' In short, women on the move are often both 'homeward bound' as well as 'home bound' (see also Lam *et al.*, 2002).

### *Home as nostalgic memories*

While the majority highlighted social relations in their definition of home, a smaller group of respondents (16.8 per cent) retained nostalgic memories of home, imagining home to be inextricably tied to their birthplace and where they had spent their childhood. Almost all respondents who single out 'nostalgia' and 'place-memory' in defining home refer to Malaysia as 'home', the place where they were born and where they had spent their childhood years<sup>13</sup>. The notion of 'home' for such groups of transmigrants is constituted by a strong yearning for the time and place of their childhood, from which they are now irrevocably removed (Yeoh and Kong, 1996). Alvin (29, Engineer) reiterates,

If there's anything I miss in Malaysia, it would be my childhood lifestyle . . . [so different] from now. I miss my friends, especially those in Form 6 . . . Those classmates . . . those days when we were naughty and did all the naughty things together, all the 'rubbish' things, I remember that . . . That was home.

As transmigrants continually subjected to the constant change and mobility of a spatially fluid world, locating 'home' in an unchanging past that is incorruptible by the often stressful present provides a source of comfort. For Peihui (29, Assistant Manager), for example, when the stresses and strains of working in Singapore become unbearable, she packs her bags and returns to Malaysia. For her, this simulates a sense of 'going home', anchored on conjuring up and recapturing the feelings of her childhood,

There is more of a homely feeling when I return to Malaysia . . . because I was brought up there so it's like the feeling is still there . . . the childhood [experience] back there. Nostalgic *lah*.<sup>14</sup>

'Home' in this sense is hence a nostalgic construction, based on a longing for a 'lost' time and place, which simultaneously provides a critical foil to present dissatisfactions.

### *Home as national identity*

While the previous two groups of respondents exercise considerable flexibility in associating 'home' with the 'nation,' a third group (13.6 per cent of the respondents) stands out for the unambiguous way in which 'home' is aligned with 'nationality' and 'national identity'. For this minority group of transmigrants, home and belonging are still tied to nationality. Among them, 60 per cent were quick to identify Malaysia as home as they remain staunchly loyal Malaysians and continue to avow Malaysian nationality. These respondents view Singapore merely as a 'moneymaking' place, while Malaysia is where their heart truly lies. Jiming (24, Engineer) states that he is *definitely* still a Malaysian as he finds himself thinking and perceiving things differently from other Singaporeans. Mingtin (27, Accountant) feels that one can never remove the bonding resulting from being 'born and bred in Malaysia' and declares that he will continue to support Malaysia in football matches against Singapore.

At the opposing end of the spectrum, 40 per cent of the same group claim Singapore as home and have now embraced Singaporean identity cards. Within this group, respondents such as Vince (37, Manager), who have grown to identify with Singapore after several years of working in the country as a PR, have chosen to redefine themselves by taking out Singaporean citizenship. While fervent patriotism for Singapore may not be the key reason, the freedom and mobility that holding a Singapore passport confers on him and his wife are important considerations that enhance the value of Singapore citizenship. In contrast, Vince feels that giving up his native citizenship is 'no big deal' as he is still able to maintain regular contact with his kin in Malaysia given Singapore's proximity. He now calls himself a Singaporean and feels that this is where his home is, sentiments that were echoed by other 'converts'. While Malthus (24, Programmer) feels that there were initially few differences between residency and citizenship<sup>15</sup>, he has come to feel a sense of pride in his adopted country, especially when representing *his* country [Singapore] in international competitions. Similarly, while identification with Singapore at the emotive level may not be the initial reason for adopting Singapore citizenship, national pride may become more palpable for Malaysians-turned-Singaporeans with time. Another 'convert', Associate Professor Chin Tet Yung, who ultimately became a Member of Parliament in his adopted country, was unequivocal in identifying Singapore as the locus of his homing instinct: 'On returning from a trip abroad, don't you just feel wonderful . . . setting foot again in your own country [Singapore]?' (*The Straits Times*, 2002c). Singapore's current policy to attract 'foreign talent' to fuel globalising ambitions has also strengthened perceptions among respondents that 'conversions' were on the increase in the wake of the Singapore government's deliberate strategy to make Singaporeans out of Malaysian professionals, first by luring them to Singapore to work, granting them residency, facilitating the establishment of new homes and gradually changing their mindsets and national identity.

#### *Home as a practical asset for changing lifecourse needs*

For a small group of respondents (11.8 per cent<sup>16</sup>), 'home' is defined by the practicalities of their lifecourse. While assets accrued through homeownership present a practical aspect of 'home' which can help root migrants to a country (Portes and Curtis, 1987), only a minority (11.5 per cent) of respondents cite such economic considerations as definitive of their notions of home. Instead, by 'practical considerations', the majority in this group conceive of 'home' either as a place that caters to their current lifestyles (61.6 per cent) or meets their retirement needs (15.4 per cent). The remaining 11.5 per cent see themselves establishing two homes in different countries, differentiated to cater to 'lifestyle needs' and 'retirement'. Home is thus a place that is transitory and alters over the life course. Home takes on a dual character and since no one single place can satisfy changing lifecourse needs, more than one 'home' is necessary – one home for the economically active phase, which

includes career development or employment opportunities, and one home for rest and retirement. Simin (23, Engineer) has this ideal map of her future,

I don't think I want to go back to Malaysia, not at this point, because I just came out [to Singapore] to work. I guess, I must, in four or five years, earn enough. Actually, if possible, I like to have my own business . . . Even though I'm a PR or even if I apply for citizenship here, I can always invest in Malaysia. So it depends on which is the better choice. So, right now . . . [I'll work in Singapore] and earn as much as I can. Then see if I make enough to set up my own business. If not, then [I'll] have to work . . . [I hope but it may not be that] I will retire in Canada. Of course, I chose a country that is more relaxing, more carefree country . . . [an ideal place] that is better for retirement.

Each 'home' in a different country has a specific purpose and is selected according to the maximum benefits one can reap for that particular purpose. This is similar to the option embraced by many 'astronauts', mainly Hong Kong businessmen and professionals, who split their family members among multiple countries in order to minimise economic risks and maximise social benefits for the family (Skeldon, 1994). These sentiments also endorse Wikström's (1995) views of home as dynamic and changing in meanings between people, generations, lifestyles, status and cultures. Home is thus an unstable entity that can be linked to different countries and/or changes along one's life course.

It is also important to note that respondents also differentiate between their definition of 'home' and their 'preference' to live in a particular place. Hence, although 45.5 per cent consider Malaysia 'home' because it is the locus of family relations or childhood memories (reasons discussed above), only 29.1 per cent prefer to live there. Respondents may articulate an idealised imagined 'home', yet prefer to live elsewhere because of practical considerations, again demonstrating the slippery nature of the concept of 'home'. For example, both Christina (28, Project Manager) and Simin continue to call Malaysia 'home' but find that they are unable to live there. They cannot revert to their former lifestyles since their expectations have changed. As Christina puts it,

Malaysia is still home as I have no family here but I won't want to go back because it is comfortable here [Singapore]. In Malaysia, they do things too slowly and so waste a lot of time . . . I don't want my children to go under their education scheme . . . there is nothing that the government can do for me or my kids. I prefer to live in a small country because of easy accessibility and I can save money in Singapore.

After becoming used to the efficiency and high standards of public infrastructure in Singapore, Chinese-Malaysian transmigrants find it difficult to adjust their expectations in Malaysia. According to Simin,

It's expectations, I guess. In Singapore, everywhere is so convenient, like, wait for a bus, one or two minutes you can get one, but in Malaysia, sometimes you have to wait for half an hour. No doubt, I complain . . . but I'll complain even more if I stayed over there . . . if you were to put me back into my *kampung* area, I would say I don't think I can accept myself there.

Transmigrants thus find it possible to live in a preferred place whilst sustaining close notional ties that bind them to their 'home' country, reflecting the ambiguous nature of 'home.' In short, conceptions of 'home' may not coincide with the practical needs for a suitable place to live yet cannot be fully divorced from them.

## NEGOTIATING 'NATIONAL IDENTITY'

Compared to the minority (above) who perceive loyalty to 'home' as umbilically tied to 'national identity', the majority of respondents experience a slippage between loyalties as they negotiate their sense of identity while working and living in Singapore. For some, their official citizenship status as Malaysians means little, for they feel more like tourists when 'returning' to Malaysia.

Alvin relates this discrepancy between identity papers and loyalties,

I hold a Malaysian passport but I feel at home here [in Singapore] . . . I feel that Singapore is my country. I feel proud that my friends in Malaysia, and even my parents, would consider me a so-called Singaporean unofficially.

In Monica's (20s, Administrative Officer) case, loyalty has been turned on its head. She exhibits signs of what Aguilar (1996) calls 'transnational shame' by distancing herself from other Malaysians, perceiving them as inferior to Singaporeans:

Generally, I think to sum it up, they are quite . . . I can only think of this Cantonese phrase [which is] . . . too vulgar [to mention] . . . you tend to look down on them [Malaysians]. Somehow I feel that Singaporeans, or people who are educated in Singapore, are more superior to the average Malaysian.

It was also obvious that even those who outwardly proclaim themselves as Malaysians are inconsistent in their use of pronouns in the course of the interviews. Often interviewees use *we* to link themselves to Singaporeans and *they* to refer to fellow Malaysians. For example, Christina kept referring to 'Malaysian ladies' as *they*: '*they* are different from *us* [referring to Singaporeans]. *They* are simpler, less materialistic . . .'

In addition to the subtler nuances of identification, several interviewees also spoke about their struggles in feeling 'caught between two countries' and the constant renegotiation of their sense of national identity at work. June (33, Assistant Manager), for example, reveals that much of the discussion and debates she has with fellow Malaysian friends residing in Singapore revolves around issues of national identity. While still espousing a Malaysian identity, they (herself included) have considerable loyalty towards Singapore, since they have lived in the city-state for over 10 years. Having already established their own family units and careers in Singapore, they feel 'protective' towards the city-state and would defend what they have in Singapore should any country 'threaten' it. The situation gets murkier if the aggressor happens to be

Malaysia since they have strong ties in both countries. In fact, such a dilemma is frequently manifested whenever Singapore and Malaysia ‘squabble’ and interviewees feel caught in the crossfire. Lena (22, Engineer) expresses this,

I have lived in Singapore by myself for some time but I still have family in Malaysia. I won't know who to side should both countries quarrel. There'll be some struggle there but . . . we have to get some sense on the situation. To be fair, we don't side with our native country just because we come from that side. We have to look at the scenario.

While taking an objective stance gives Chinese-Malaysians in Singapore a strategy to negotiate their loyalties in the face of the frequent spats between the two countries, some express ambivalence as to what course of action they will resort to if more serious confrontations erupted between the two countries.

Other interviewees take the view that national identity is only a technicality related to official papers and therefore pragmatism should rule. While they do not feel passionately Malaysian, they have retained their Malaysian citizenship while liberally using permanent residency status as a strategy to inhabit different nations. In this way, they enjoy the best of several worlds while maintaining Malaysian citizenship as an economic and political strategy to cope with future developments. For some such as Simin, this pragmatic strategy creates a hybrid form of national identity that she comfortably inhabits:

If you see a person's nationality by citizenship, of course I am Malaysian. Even though I am applying for [Singapore] PR now, I'm still a Malaysian. In terms of . . . the way I live here, I guess I'm more Singaporean . . . So to me, I don't know . . . I think I still consider myself a Malaysian but with Singaporean type of lifestyle. That is fine with me.

For others, defining a national identity has become an almost impossible task. Ken (30, Lawyer) feels like a ‘rolling stone’ and cannot specify any place as home or lay claim to any nation with which he would identify. Jonathan, who works in Singapore but has family in both Malaysia and Australia, feels that citizenship as a singular concept is too abstract, and claims a more fragmented sense of national belonging:

It's too abstract for me, being a citizen . . . In my present job and very often . . . in international meetings and I speak for Singapore, I feel totally comfortable doing that. I don't feel that I am not part of the scene . . . to all practical purposes it makes sense that there is that identity. For Malaysia, it's a place I grew up in; associate all the things with childhood. I also feel comfortable with that and I have very happy years in Australia . . . so I guess for me there's a streak of Australia. My kids feel very strongly Australian, they grew up there. My wife, although taken up citizenship, don't feel quite Australian. So I think that part of me which is associated with the kids, I feel I have a home there because my kids are in that place, they think like Australians.

Yet, other interviewees choose to opt out of the ‘national identity conflict’, stressing that it is an issue they tend not to think about since they are

comfortable everywhere. They profess a more cosmopolitan viewpoint, seeing the world, as Alexander (30s, Executive) puts it, as 'one big global village'. In the same vein, Ling (24, Accountant) stresses,

Basically whether you are Singaporean, Malaysian or where you are from, you are still human . . . so, doesn't matter . . . wherever we are, still the same . . . why put a border on yourself?

Like other transmigrants who have formed new cosmopolitan identities and subjectivities (Nonini, 1997), they claim to be indifferent to where they live; display an acceptance and openness manifested in their ability to integrate and function effectively in any society and are not tied to any particular place (Dharwadkar, 2001; Tuan, 1996). This sense of cosmopolitan 'indifference' to place is, however, limited and not always sustainable in the realm of practical politics. As part of a minority, Chinese-Malaysians are often worried about the developments of social policies and other political happenings in both countries as well as between them. Given the lack of social trust in Malaysia (Means, 1991), these pragmatic Chinese-Malaysians tend to watch Malaysia's political scene closely and actively seek updated news, given their vulnerability to any social or political upheavals that may affect their families and social ties spanning the causeway. Respondents are also simultaneously alert to policy changes in the 'host' country that may jeopardise their presence in Singapore. Monica, who remains politically attuned to both countries, has these worries,

I just hope that they don't get carried away and you know impose some stupid rule like [Singaporean] PRs should come back to Malaysia or else you would be disowned or something . . . I think political issues can get very sensitive and ultimately if they do start arguing and things get worst, we may be the ones suffering at the end . . .

In general, while Chinese-Malaysians value meritocracy and are strongly appreciative of the Singapore government's efforts in sustaining multiracialism which places all races on an equal footing, they are also conscious of their status of being a minority – in different ways – in both Malaysia and Singapore. Being politically astute and willing to fight doubly hard for their rights is hence part of negotiating the transmigrant experience across the dividing line between two countries with a common history but different political complexions.

## CONCLUSION

As transmigrants reconstitute their 'simultaneous embeddedness' in two (or more) societies, they constantly negotiate notions of 'home' and 'national identity' against and across political borders separating these societies, thus creating ever-shifting geographies of home and identity. Conceptions of 'home', whether singular or multiple, are increasingly fluid and ambivalent. In fact, as,

in the case of the majority of respondents in this study, rather than a stable place that one physically inhabits, home may be a place in which one does *not* prefer to live in. At the same time, it is clear from the responses that while home may have become an itinerant concept, it is not an empty one, but continues to be loaded with meanings centred on family and kin relations, nostalgia, national pride and lifecourse events. It should also be noted that the gendered contours that define home continue to persist even when home has multiplied over borders, for the emotional and social maintenance of more than one home still depends on women more so than men.

While the notion of 'national identity' is unambiguously aligned to 'home' for a minority of the respondents, 'home and country' no longer form 'a functional equation' in many cases (Bammer, 1994: 94). Holding Malaysian citizenship and subscribing to Malaysian identity often does not prevent most respondents from establishing homes elsewhere. Conversely, continuing to locate one's sense of home in Malaysia does not necessarily strengthen national identity. In fact, some Chinese-Malaysians exhibit 'transnational shame' which prompt them to distance themselves from fellow nationals while increasing their identification with the host country. More navigate the transmigratory experience by subscribing to 'a density of overlapping allegiances rather than the abstract emptiness of nonallegiance' (Robbins, 1998: 250). Among these, some claim cosmopolitan indifference to any place or nation and the meaningless nature of 'citizenship'. The constant and simultaneous state of being 'here and there' (Smith, 1992: 516) may translate into a situation of never being defined as 'us' or 'them' (Keith and Pile, 1993: 222) and in the face of this, the discrepancies between citizenship and locality may lead to a sense of 'placelessness' or 'homelessness' (Friedman, 1998). At the same time, others are struggling with hybrid notions of national identity 'in-between' nations.

In the context of economic, political and social structures which bind/divide 'home' and/from 'host' countries, a greater consciousness of and a double concern for the politics and policies of each nation gives transmigrants the wherewithal to negotiate, in the words of Ling, how to 'place a border on [one]self'. These tensions are likely to amplify in the face of recurrent political squabbles but also the intensified economic competition between the two countries as they rework their labour policies to attract transmigratory talent. It is hence likely that Chinese-Malaysians will have to continually adopt flexible strategies in negotiating 'home' and 'national identity' in straddling both the ties that bind, and the lines that divide, two similar-yet-different countries.

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## NOTES

- 1 The term 'Chinese-Malaysians' is used to refer to ethnic Chinese respondents from Malaysia. Most of the respondents were born in Malaysia and see themselves primarily as Malaysians. The term 'Chinese' as used here functions as an adjective distinguishing Chinese ethnicity in the context of a multi-ethnic country.
- 2 Dual nationalities are different from dual citizenships in terms of entitlements. Only selected countries such as Taiwan and India permit their citizens to hold dual citizenships, allowing them to have passports belonging to two different countries and enjoying complete rights in both (Faist, 2000a; 2000b; Labelle and Midy, 1999). People with dual nationalities hold one passport but have residential status in another country.
- 3 The Malays formed United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). Chinese formed Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) while Indians formed Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).
- 4 *Bumiputra*, literally translated as 'sons of the soil', comprises ethnic Malays and other indigenous people of Malaysia (Jomo, 1990; United Nations, 1982).
- 5 Under the quota system, *bumiputra* continue to have priority in government jobs and local universities (Sullivan and Gunasekaran, 1993). They also receive special scholarships for education, government contracts, cheaper housing, car loans and shares in corporations (*International Herald Tribune*, 5/1/2001).
- 6 Apart from trying to woo back their own citizens, Malaysia has also decided to adopt English as the medium of instruction in a possible endeavour to curtail the outflow of Malaysians (mainly Chinese) hankering after a Singaporean education and subsequently working in Singapore (see *New Straits Times*, 2001; *The Straits Times*, 2002d). They have also been actively developing technology parks, airports and ports to compete directly with Singapore (*Inter Press Service*, 12/6/2002).
- 7 Issues of contention include the water agreement, land reclamation by Singapore, the use of Malaysian airspace by Singapore's air force, the location of Malaysia's immigration and customs facilities in Singapore, development of Malaysian railway land in Singapore and the withdrawal of money from the Central Provident Fund (CPF) by West-Malaysian workers who have worked in Singapore (*The Straits Times*, 2001h). Malaysia is unhappy with Singapore for not cooperating with them on their plans to rebuild the existing causeway (*The Straits Times*, 2003). Both countries have also been arguing over the sovereignty rights of Pedra Branca, an offshore island.
- 8 Employment passes are given based on one's qualifications and salary. They can be further differentiated into different grades and are awarded so long the applicant meets the criteria. P passes are accorded to foreigners with recognised 'tertiary/professional qualifications who are seeking professional, administrative, executive or managerial jobs or who are entrepreneurs or investors' (Ministry of Manpower, 2000: 3). P1 holders must have a basic monthly salary greater than S\$7000 while P2 holders' basic monthly salary must fall between S\$3500 and S\$7000. Q1 passes are issued to foreigners with a minimum of 5 GCE 'O' levels or a full NTC-2 Certificate and a basic monthly salary greater than S\$2000. Q2 passes are awarded on exceptional basis.
- 9 Generally, PRs have an advantageous position in being able to keep the citizenship of their home country while possessing resident status in multiple countries.
- 10 PR schemes for foreign talents include Approved-in-Principle for Singapore PR; Landed Permanent Residence; Professionals, Technical Personnel & Skilled Workers Scheme; Foreign Artistic Talent Scheme; Deposit Scheme and Business Migration Programme (Contact Singapore, 1999).

- 11 All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the respondents.
- 12 The remaining 9.3% locate 'home' in other countries apart from Singapore and Malaysia.
- 13 A few exceptions refer to Singapore where they had grown up.
- 14 *Lah* is a commonly used Singlish tag which is often added for emphasis. It is used almost like a full stop at the end of a sentence (Goh and Woo, 2002).
- 15 PRs in Singapore enjoy education, health and social benefits similar to Singapore citizens except for some differences: for example, they are bonded upon receiving tuition grant for tertiary education; must seek approval when buying restricted residential property in Singapore; can only attain PR status for their children born in Singapore; are not eligible for Edusave and CPF housing grants, child tax rebates and Baby Bonus Scheme; are unable to buy first hand flats from Housing and Development Board but are able to buy resale flats under selected schemes and they are unable to vote or stand for election (Contact Singapore, 2002). Often, these differences are of little importance to the respondents.
- 16 Within this group of respondents who define home according to practical considerations, a similar percentage (23.1% respectively) locate their notion of home in Malaysia or Singapore while 11.5% consider both countries as equally practical options. A larger proportion (42.3%) deems home in other countries as the more practical, and preferred, option.

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