

Class Dismissed: The Malaysian Chinese Community in Bukit Mertajam

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The grand narrative regarding the Malaysian Chinese community as a 'rich community' is still dominant in Malaysia which overshadows the real situation of the Malaysian Chinese community since Malaysian Chinese tycoons only make up a small part of the community. Therefore, this article will provide an alternative story about The Malaysian Chinese community by discovering how working space is divided along gender lines and social class within the Malaysian Chinese community of Bukit Mertajam from the 1990s onwards through auto-ethnography. The discussion regarding the Malaysian Chinese Society of Bukit Mertajam would be intertwined with Ara Wilson's theory about masculinity and gendered class in Sino Thai society as well as Aihwa Ong's Spirit of Resistance (1998), which investigated the female factory workers in Malaysia. I am heavily indebted to Nonini's work entitled "Getting By" which has inspired me to further discuss the social class issue of Malaysian Chinese, which, as a group has been dismissed by society.

Keywords: social class, gendered work, Chinese society

This article will disclose how the working space is divided along gender lines and social class within the Malaysian Chinese community of Bukit Mertajam from the 1990s onwards through auto-ethnography. The discussion regarding the Malaysian Chinese Society of Bukit Mertajam would be intertwined with Wilson Ara's theory about masculinity and gendered class in Sino Thai society as well as Aihwa Ong's Spirit of Resistance (1998), which investigated the female factory workers in Malaysia. Furthermore, I am also citing Donald M. Nonini's work (2015) entitled "Getting By" as my main reference source, which is an ethnography discussing Malaysian Chinese who lived in Bukit Mertajam (大山脚) from the year 1978 until 1990. I am heavily indebted to Nonini's work entitled "Getting By" which has inspired me to further discuss the social class issue of Malaysian Chinese, which, as a group, have been dismissed by society.

Before entering the discussion on class-based interaction of Malaysian Chinese, a brief introduction about the history of Malaysia, as well as the background of Bukit Mertajam, should be given. Firstly, I will give a brief overview of the historical context of Malaysia which will then be followed by a background on Bukit Mertajam. Secondly, I will discuss the terms Towkay and female workers. Thirdly, I will disclose the approach of getting rich in this community. Lastly, the conclusion will be the end of this article.

The historical context of Malaysia

Malaysia was under British colonial rule from the early 18th century until the late 19th century. During the British colonial period, high numbers of Chinese and Indian immigrants were brought in with the main goal to serve British economic interests. With the influx of immigrants, the British authority implemented the divide and rule system in order to control those immigrants and natives more easily. This system made different immigrant populations work in different job categories and divided them by region as well. The Malaysian Chinese or Southeast Asian Chinese still are labeled as “Middle Class” and “Bourgeois”. The Chinese working-class, however, remained largely invisible in Malaysia due to historical factors. After World War II, the British returned and declared Malayan Emergency in 1948. The reason for this was the uprising of the Communist Party of Malaya and the Chinese working class while at the same time the British imposed strong forced silence in the working class society (Nonini, 2015).

The Malayan Emergency period in 1948 was a crucial period for the lower-class Chinese, not only were they forced to reside in Kampung Baru (New Village /新村) (Nonini, 2015), they also suffered from voicing out their discontentment as they were widely suspected of having Communist sympathies. Hence, any discussion on class oppression and exploitation among Malaysian Chinese society was prohibited, which caused collective forgetfulness among them (Nonini, 2015).

Bukit Mertajam

During the British colonial rule, Penang was known as Strait Settlement and most of the Chinese immigrants worked in Penang Island, but some of them resided on the opposite side of Penang Island, which is Bukit Mertajam. Therefore, it is currently one of the states in Malaysia with a majority of Malaysian Chinese. Malaysian Chinese in Bukit Mertajam has been involved in all kinds of trades, “not only shop owners, but also merchants, dealers, brokers, salesmen, and transporters as well as wholesale trade” (Nonini, 2015). The main lingua francas in Bukit Mertajam are Hokkien and Teochew and is the transfer point (轉點) within the Penang region (Nonini, 2015). Ever since Nonini arrived at Bukit Mertajam in 1979, he managed to get into contact with those Malaysian Chinese who were heavily influenced by the two emergency periods (British Malayan Emergency in 1948 and Emergency after May riot 1969). They were terrified to disclose any information regarding the Malayan Emergency since he looked like a British. They even self-censored on discussing the May riot incident in order to avoid getting into trouble.



"File:Bukit Mertajam federal constituency.svg" by *angys* is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

All about *Towkay*

The term *Tao Kae* was mentioned by Wilson Ara (2004), in her book entitled “*The intimate economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the global city*”. Ara Wilson uses the term *Tao Kae* to address male bosses who associate themselves with male masculinity, polygamy, and prostitution as well as gendered work in Sino-Thai families (Ara, 2004). In Malaysia, the term *towkay*, which I borrowed from Nonini bears a lot of similarities with the term *Tao Kae* used in the Sino-Thai family, but some differences remain between both terms. In Bukit Mertajam, *towkay* can have different meanings. First, *towkays* can be male leaders of family businesses, second, it can be used in an insulting way to disclose people who pretend to be *towkay* but are actually people of no position (Nonini, 2015).

In Bukit Mertajam, the majority of Malaysian Chinese belong to the working-class or are petty businessmen, whereas only a minority belongs to the mercantile elite (tycoon) (Nonini, 2015). Hence, I would like to argue, in accordance with Nonini (2015) that the popular belief of Chinese domination in Malaysia is not completely true. In reality, the minority of Chinese Malaysian tycoons are overrepresented in Malaysian society creating the image of a rich Chinese Malaysian community, while in reality, the majority of Chinese Malaysians belong to the lower social classes.

Nonini (2015) further disclosed the difficulty that he encountered while asking his informants who are “Doing Business” and petty business *Towkay* about “how is your business doing?” and the tactic of resistance responses. For instance, “We are getting by” (我們過了), “We can get by” (我們可以過 (生活)) or “We can only get by” (我們只可以過 (生活)). I, as a child of a Chinese Malaysian

petty business family growing up in Bukit Mertajam, can relate very well to the way these informants responded to Nonini's questions, which are sensitive for them because they do not disclose much about their living and they barely share it to others. Furthermore, there is also a generational difference in how *towkay* behaves: the first generation of *towkay* are "typically Chinese" who started out poor and worked hard through their own effort (白手起家) (Nonini, 2015). Those typical Chinese barely knew the Chinese language, most of them spoke Hokkien or Teochew, and they wore shabby clothes and were "disguised like working-class people". They did not only do this to avoid the attention of the state upon them but also to be modest (純樸) to enhance one's reputation among others. Whereas, according to Nonini (91), for the second generation of *towkay*, they received a better education and know the Chinese language, and they behave like "big shot", they wear branded clothes or drive fancy branded cars like Benz. However, there are still many working-class people dressing and acting like the middle class while actually, they belong to lower social classes. Hence, the response of 'getting by' is on the one hand a way to deceive the state but on the other hand away to position oneself as "doing business" not only for self-development but also for self-reputation enhancement (Nonini, 90). Beh who was one of the informants who has been a petty-bourgeois in Bukit Mertajam for more than 20 years, claimed that:

"There are branches of rich towkays dressing like poor working-class people, if they encounter difficulties and need a big amount of money, don't be surprised that they are able to withdraw their money from the bank, they are just pretending to be poor." He further explained: "whereas those who act like "big shots", spending money on good food and luxuries, most of them are not that rich, they only pretend to be rich by spending all their money without saving any."

Apart from that, most of the rich *towkays* practicing polygamy, which had mentioned by Nonini (2015). The practice of polygamy has been considered as a culture of rich *towkays* which is also being mentioned in Wilson's Chapter 1, in which she studies how Sino-Thai *Tao Kae* show their masculinity through flirting with women (Wilson, 2004). In Bukit Mertajam, it was very prevalent for the rich *towkays* to marry multiple times even though it was illegal. My mother said:

"It is common for most of the rich towkays to have more than one wife, it's because they are rich so they could 'afford' it. Hence, they are able to spend more, and so they can flirt more. (他們可以花錢當然也容易花心). A rich towkay can marry as many wives as possible without going through the process of legal marriage registration. They just have to hold a wedding ceremony and that is it". She further explained: "because, in the birth certificates of the child, it is fine to just write only the mother's name without mentioning the father."

Wilson (2004) also mentions in chapter 1 how wives and children are trained to work in the family business and how usually the eldest son is appointed to inherit the business. The practice of inheriting business by the elder son of the family is also common in the Malaysian Chinese community, not only in Bukit Mertajam. This use of kinship[1] discourse (Wilson, 2004), is used by most of the family businesses to prolong the business. Furthermore, the value of helping one's own family was also heavily imposed on the children of the *towkays* too. The business is centralized and connected with the family, however, this also led to self-exploitation as well as the exploitation of kinship (Nonini, 2004). The reason why Malaysian Chinese society refused to hire outsiders is that they are afraid the outsider will 'steal' all their skills and compete with them (Nonini, 2015). Furthermore, with the help of their children, they can not only secure their business and skills, but they can also save costs on hiring outsiders since they claim making business is so difficult. On the

other hand, this reflected the local businessmen facing a great amount of insecurity and uncertainty in pursuing wealth (Nonini, 2015). Beh Choong Kiang, a petty businessman who lived in Bukit Mertajam since he was born asserted:

“Most of the Chinese towkays think it’s a must for their first son to inherit their business. Of course, yes, it is just helping the business to get by and at the same time, they will gain the skills too. This is very basic.”

In fact, the predatory state has a direct and indirect influence on the Chinese petty capitalists in daily life. In Malay officials’ point of view, bribing is more a way of mutual helping instead of predation, whereas, the Chinese complained about this relationship, although it still allows them to “get by” (Nonini, 2015). Other than that, “the shadow political economy” underneath the tributary relations has a certain logic behind it: the more capital possessed by the business, the more eagerly the state officials seek to extract from it through forceful yet legal methods. Therefore, the result of the shadow economy, according to Nonini (2015), was to discourage men to own businesses and deflate the visible size of the business, in order to appear to be “poor”. Therefore, Chinese petty capitalists’ claim “to just getting by” made sense as being the common response. Just like the acts of self-exploitation and family members exploitation are part of their deceptive skills in order to look poor and thus avoid state attention.

Female workers

The patriarchal system was dominant and in Malaysian Chinese societies (重男輕女), particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Nonini (2015) stated that “women workers” (女工) who are working in the garment factories are involved in asymmetrical power relations in their family life (elder brothers and father) as well as in the factories (male bosses, production managers as well as few elder male workers). Furthermore, their mobility was restrictedly limited by their family. Nonini further addressed that immobility is the factor that led to the absence of women in most working environments in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the women during that period need to be accompanied by their father, brother, or husband in order to leave the house or village. This discussion draws the connection with Aihwa Ong’s (2010) *Spirit of Resistance* in which she investigates how Malay women deal with traditional family values in a society being more and more affected by capitalism. Females were trained to do household chores but discouraged from wandering around or *merantau*. In short, the mobility of Malaysian females was restricted, this was not different for Malay Chinese women. Yun, a Malaysian Chinese housewife who had been living in Bukit Mertajam for more than 30 years stated:

“You must follow since there is no excuse to avoid the demand of elder male (嫁雞隨雞). Even my mother had this experience too, they were told to defer to older males or their husbands. She even worked with your grandpa like a horse (做牛做馬) when he demanded.” She offered another bitter story that happened to her friend: “Just look at my friend who married the hotpot restaurant boss, she does not have her own life and status in the family, what she can do is just work 365 days without taking rest and yet her husband and father-in-law do not even appreciate her.”

Beh further claimed: “My mother always stays at home to do household chores and she barely goes out, not even to the wet market. Furthermore, my sisters too, it’s a must for them to do the household, but I don’t have to do it myself because they will do it for me.”

The case above has proven that Nonini's (2015) and Aihwa Ong's (2010) discussion about the Malaysian female, are pretty similar. Younger and unmarried daughters were expected to defer to the older males who have the authority over them. But also married women faced exploitation from their family-in-law. Other than that, Nonini's (2015) study was limited to the discussion on the Malaysian Chinese females, which I would like to further discuss. Especially the expectation of Malaysian Chinese families towards their daughters. In the 1970s and 1980s, most of the poor Chinese families living in villages /kampung could not afford the living cost due to poverty. The situation happened to be similar to the case described by Aihwa Ong (2010); daughters were expected to help the domestic household and urged to find a job somewhere near a Free Trade Zone to support the family, while the sons of the family were encouraged to continue their study. My informant, Yun who had been living in Bukit Mertajam for more than 20 years, further said:

“Doing housework is a must! We were required to do it ourselves, including the aunts but not the boys. My brothers did not have to do household or wash their clothes, it’s so unfair but we know. And because of poverty, no matter how difficult the situation is, the family still let the boys attending school. All of the sisters went to work at a very early age, for instance, my sister, she started working when she was eight as a domestic keeper because the family was too poor to support her study. I only started working in form 3[2]. And I went to work in factories in the Free Trade Zone in Perai too.”

I barely hear of Malaysian female Chinese working in factories nowadays. Most high school drop-outs, prefer working as a waitress in restaurants or promoter in the shopping malls instead. Furthermore, it is getting common for them to work far away from their family. There are plenty of Malaysian female Chinese I know who are working in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur though they are from different states of Malaysia. All of my friends disclosed to me that ‘working outstation’ (working in another province/ city) is not an issue anymore since they are free from family restrictions or their father’s authority. Hence, the patriarchal system somehow has less influence on Malaysian Chinese females when compared to the 1970s and 1980s as most Malaysian female Chinese are not restricted anymore.

Shortcuts of getting rich

The two most common ways to getting rich in Malaysian Chinese communities are either “Walking the Dark Road[3]” (走暗路) as explained by Nonini (2015), and “jumping the airplane”, which will be explained in the next section. In the 1980s, those Malaysian Chinese who were poor but suddenly became rich were most likely involved in smuggling drugs, particularly opium in Bukit Mertajam. According to Nonini (2015), the possibility of fast-upward mobility would tempt a lot of people in “Walking the Dark Road”. According to Yun:

“Especially in the 70s and 80s most of the poor Chinese in Bukit Mertajam became rich because of selling Opium, including some of our relatives. And most of them contributed to Chinese society in order to avoid being suspected of smuggling drugs.”

Moreover, Beh further supported her point by claiming that:

“The fastest path to becoming rich is to do drugs smuggling, even until now, those who were the first ones to get involved in drug smuggling, their descendants are following their path and most of them are perceived as doing ‘side door’ (偏門) since it is an illegal job.”

Jumping airplane

Other than “walking the dark road”, “jumping airplane” (跳飛機) was another common way in the 1990s to become rich and escape from being Malaysian Chinese in Bukit Mertajam. I heard the term “airplane jumping” when I was a high school student and I had no idea what it meant until my mother disclosed it to me. At that time, one of my high school friends announced that she was going to immigrate to Australia. Furthermore, she explained that her parents managed to gain residence status so they wanted to start a new life there. Another friend of hers secretly told me that her parents were “jumping airplane” yet she did not further explain the meaning of the term until I went home to ask my mom. The definition of jumping airplane is when transnational reversals are working abroad illegally/ without a work permit in order to earn very high wages (Nonini, 2015). Airplane jumping is gendered since it was only available for men due to the privilege of male mobility. Many male working-class members imagined they could earn a big amount of money this way in order to start up a new small-scale business in Malaysia. This idea reflected the fantasized life trajectory of upward mobility as the privilege of male mobility and the practice of merantau (Nonini, 2015). Nevertheless, according to Nonini’s (2015) interviews with his informants, most of the airplane jumping attempts were not quite successful and they faced unexpected obstacles overseas such as unemployed and forced gambling (Nonini, 280). He also stated that most of the sojourns of labor migrants were in Japan and Taiwan (Nonini, 2015). On the other hand, according to my own informant Yun Siew Ping, not only Japan and Taiwan were popular destinations, but many also went to England so as to find a job while using a visiting travel visa. Yun asserted:

“Most of my friends decided to go to England to work illegally, they all work in Chinatown. Only working as a dish cleaner can earn you at least triple the amount of money when compared to here.” She further stated, “Some of them who were quite lucky, we’re able to become residents. If they are able to prolong their work over there they would continue to send money back, but some who are not so lucky were caught and send back to Malaysia. But they became rich now.”

Obviously, there were no disadvantages for jumping airplanes compared to the possibility of social upward mobility, therefore more and more Malaysian Chinese prefer jumping airplanes in the early 1990s. On the other hand, the jumping airplane also created a notorious image for Malaysian Chinese as they abused their travel visa in England. Hence, the abuse of travel visa was the cause for the limitation of legal job opportunities for Malaysian in England. It also led to the restriction, and reinforcement of the border control, so that many Malaysian Chinese switched their target destination from England to Australia. With the reference of Nonini (2015), most of those who attempted airplane jumping were not successful. Nevertheless, until now, there are still many Malaysian Chinese seeking alternatives to obtain social upward mobility. Most of those involved in jumping airplanes are youngsters.

The term, *Towkay* does not offer better status to the Malaysian Chinese Community as they are trying to ‘survive’ by pretending to be poor. The patriarchy system was dominant in Malaysian

Chinese societies (重男輕女), particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Even though women can work in the factory, their mobility was restricted by their families. However, this situation somehow has changed nowadays since the patriarchal system has less influence on Malaysian female Chinese. The only other way to become rich was to get involved in drug smuggling or airplane jumping in the 1970s and 1980s. Even though airplane jumping is not always workable for them, airplane jumping is still prevalent among youngsters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, with the antagonist state policy as well as limited resources available, even just for the sake of survival, some of them are still in the situation of “getting by” (過得還可以/可以過得去). On the other hand, some of them seek to escape their situation by looking for the fastest way of gaining success yet overlook the risks of the situation they could face. What has been suggested is that it is a necessity to reevaluate the grand narratives of those successful capitalist exemplars and also to rethink the metaphors of Chinese identities as well as subjectivities in all the narratives of triumph.

Notes

[1] Refer to pg 37-41, the kinship system includes the obligation of the children involved in the family business and the responsibility of wives and daughters on managing family relationships, business, and society.

[2] Form 3 is known as lower secondary

[3] Refer to pg 262-268, both are ways of labor sojourns in Malaysian society.

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