

## Appendix

# **Women and Chinese Identity: An Exchange at the Closing Session of the Workshop**

Towards the end of the workshop, four participants — Mely Tan, Wang Gungwu, Leo Suryadinata and Tan Chee Beng — discussed the role of indigenous/*peranakan* women who married Chinese men. The discussion is presented below.

### *Mely Tan*

I am wondering why we have not really looked at the role of women in this whole process. Why have we ignored the role of 50 per cent of the ethnic Chinese that we have been talking about? In Asian culture, both parents, especially the mother, are the socializers of the younger generation. To my knowledge, in our culture in this region, mothers are usually given the task of educating the young. Now, we seem to have completely forgotten how the women educate their children in this whole process. That is why I asked Dr Chiew Seen Kong about his sisters who went to Chinese language schools, while all his brothers went to English schools.

I was serious about this question but he took it lightly, saying that there is a problem but did not pursue the point. If I leave this conference without saying anything about this, I will feel sorry. All my friends who went to China to attend the Beijing United Nations conference on women will also feel sorry. What did we do in this workshop? We talked about the continuation of cultural change and ignored completely the role of 50 per cent of the people — the women. Well, there is no time to remedy this situation but I think in future conferences, we should really consider this issue. Thank you.

### *Wang Gungwu*

I am absolutely delighted that Mely has raised this question. But the answer may well be unpalatable to the ethnic Chinese — that is, of all the communities in Southeast Asia, the Chinese are probably the most male chauvinistic in their cultural tradition. In fact, Southeast Asians are much more bilateral in the descent line. It is probably a reflection of how unintegrated the ethnic Chinese are to Southeast Asian culture that they are still so patriarchal. In a sense, this is a test because of all the cultures that I know, Chinese culture is the most strictly patriarchal. Of course, it has been in a way reinforced by the fact that from the very beginning, it was mostly men who came to Southeast Asia and they married local women. If you look at the background of the *baba/peranakan* family you will see that the males were able to dominate and preserve a Chinese identity. The very fact that we see the survival of these *baba/peranakan* families is a sign of the “maleness” of the Chinese tradition itself. When you consider that the mothers were Southeast Asians, most of their children should have become Southeast Asians very quickly, if the children followed their mother tongue and their mother’s culture; in a bilateral cultural situation, this would have been very normal. In many ways, I think that is what happened in the Philippines, where the indigenous bilateral line was strong enough. Moreover, with the support of the Catholic Church, the Chinese males had to identify locally and could not dictate the adherence to Chinese culture to the same extent as the *baba/peranakan* did in Indonesia and Malaysia.

I always find it fascinating that in the Philippines, the assimilation of the next generation of ethnic Chinese did not follow the male line as much as in the Malaysian and Indonesian world. I think the reason is that in the Philippines the bilateral line descent tradition is very strong. I mean, you can see even among the indigenous Filipinos themselves, the tensions between the patrilocal and matrilocal lines. Islam brought a male chauvinistic line to Malaysia and Indonesia, and so with the male chauvinistic Chinese culture plus the male chauvinistic Islamic culture, we get this *baba/peranakan* kind of community. In Vietnam, Thailand or Myanmar, the women were also stronger in their bilateral descent relationship and therefore it was just as likely for the product of a mixed marriage to follow the mother and not necessarily accept the culture of the Chinese father. That may be one of the reasons why we do not really hear of the equivalent of a *baba/peranakan* culture in Myanmar, Thailand or Vietnam. They could either go one way or the other but not in between; only in Malaysia and Indonesia do we have this *baba/peranakan* community.

This relates very much to the question of why in the Philippines it is the other way around. When we look at the mestizo, few of them really maintain a Chinese ethnic identity. There is no *baba/peranakan* kind of situation in the Chinese mestizo. Although people may say they still have Chinese links, they are really Filipinos. The fact that their grandfathers were Chinese is irrelevant because they were brought up mainly by the mother, or the female line, with the backing of the Catholic Church, thus ensuring that they were much more Filipino. So I agree with Mely that the role of the women should be examined more closely if we have another opportunity to do so, by tracing the product of intermarriages where the role of the women have made a difference to the degree of assimilation and integration. I think that is a very important point.

### *Leo Suryadinata*

Professor Wang has raised an interesting point on the role of women in the retention of Chinese identity. I remember William Skinner did a study in the early 1950s, arguing that the marriage custom of the *peranakan* in West Java followed the indigenous

pattern. It was “matriarchal” as the wedding was held and the marriage was consummated in the bride’s home rather than in the bridegroom’s house.

We do not know their precise identity. It is possible that some of them became more indigenous but others remained Chinese, depending on the cultural background of the men. In the twentieth century, many *peranakan* women married *totok* men. The male chauvinist culture was revived and dominated the *peranakan* society again. Perhaps, the preservation of the Chinese ethnic identity among the *peranakan* Chinese is also a result of the Dutch “ethnic separation” policy in Java. I don’t know. I think more study should be conducted on this issue.

### Tan Chee Beng

Can I add to that? Yes, this is an interesting issue. I do agree with Professor Wang that the male ideology is quite strong even among the *baba*. Among the *baba* of Malacca, Singapore, and Penang, there was this phenomenon of matrilocal marriage. This is actually an expression of male ideology involving the class factor. The *baba* were more established, and *peranakan* women (*nyonya*) were very “precious”. When a Chinese immigrant wanted to marry a *nyonya* from an established family, her father might say to the future son-in-law, “Well, you have to come in to my family”. This is what I mean by the class factor. So this matrilocal marriage became established. But there is another factor which Leo raised, which is important. With the influx of the Chinese migrants, the *baba* eventually had to conform to the rules of the non-*baba* Chinese. Thus, the *baba* today do not practise matrilocal marriage any longer.

In the case of the *nyonya*, I think they played an important role in the socialization of identity, in perpetuating the *baba* or *nyonya* kind of culture, in the forms of cuisine, dress, and language, of course. And the *nyonya* played an important role in making the local-born Chinese speak Malay within a generation. But if we study the subject of cooking, its development really reflects the traditional male ideology, in that women were expected to stay at home to cultivate feminine skills like cooking, so as to be marriageable and to serve men at home.

*Leo Suryadinata*

The role of women and ethnic identity is very interesting but we do not have time to examine it in detail. I hope this topic will be further explored.