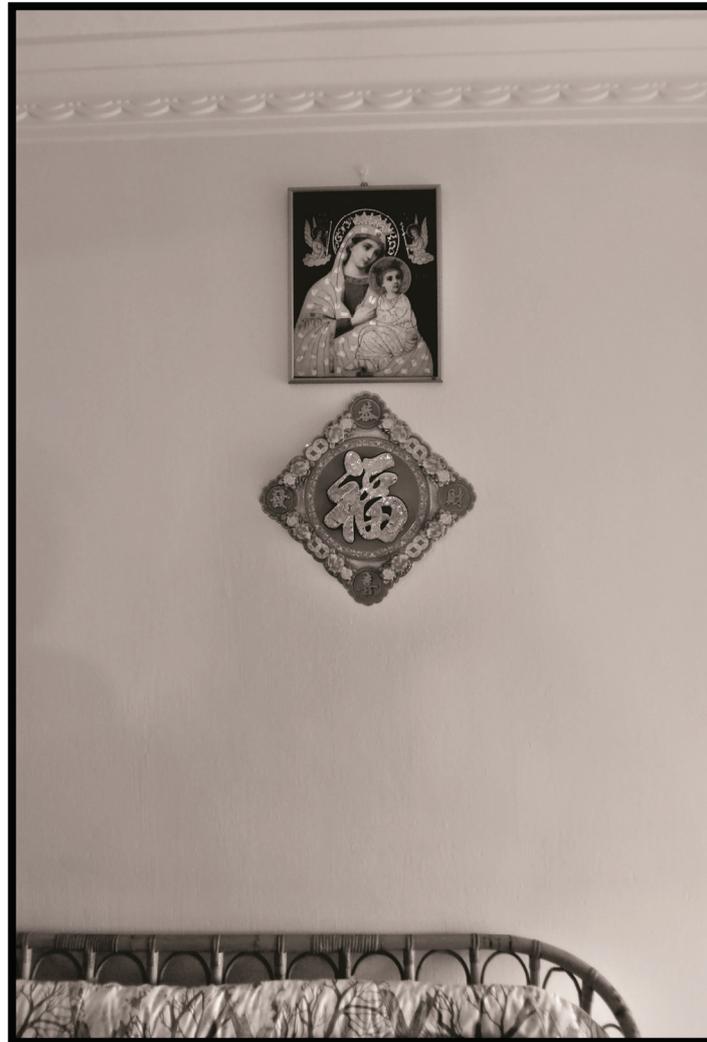


Making Chineseness in Transdiasporic Space: It's a Matter of Ethnic Taste



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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis, *Making Chineseness in Transdiasporic Space: It's a Matter of Ethnic Taste* is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration.

Terence Heng

Abstract

This thesis addresses shortfalls in the sociological literature on diaspora, ethnicity and ethnicity-making amongst diasporic individuals. My original contribution is an improved and more nuanced take on *diasporic* individuals' ethnicities and the mechanisms through which these ethnicities are made. I will do this by reconfiguring collectivist versions of diaspora into an individualised *transdiasporic space*, and redefining ethnicity as *transdiasporic ethnicity*. Transdiasporic ethnicities are made in the social intimacies and distances between individuals and between their *ethnic lifestyles (sets of aesthetic markers)*. Such distances are affected by individuals' *ethnic tastes* – preferences for or against different lifestyles.

My arguments are based on a study of Chinese Singaporeans and their wedding rituals. Weddings are *microcosms of transdiasporic space* – multiple crossroads for intersecting diasporic journeys and everyday lives. I will employ a *visually-focussed form of participant observation*, arguing that the use of photographs *with* text creates a richer space to do sociological work. I will also develop a methodological framework of photography as *visual poetry*, creating an emotional texture that text alone struggles to achieve.

Chinese Singaporeans engage in outward-facing *taste performances* which reveal their ethnic lifestyles to others. Juxtaposed taste performances often lead to aesthetic dissonance, which encourages individuals to make *decisions* affecting their ethnic tastes. This tends to result in social distancing between two socially prominent ethnic lifestyles which were politically defined and are now part of popular discourse – “heartlander” and “cosmopolitan”. These lifestyles are often held in tension and tend to be connected to different levels of economic wealth. *Commercial activities* in weddings perpetuate such linkages, such that socio-economic aspirations often texture ethnic tastes. I will conclude by considering what aesthetic dissonance says about concepts of ethnic hybridity and syncretism, and propose that a Chinese Singaporean's economic life-path continues to be affected by the ethnic lifestyles she is socially intimate with.

Dedication

For E-Ping, my wife. For without this thesis we would never have met.

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Introduction



Social groups that are collectively referred to as “the Chinese Diaspora” (Davidson and Kuaah-Pearce 2008, Wang 1991) are one of the most significantly growing social and physical movements in contemporary society (Cohen 1997). Scholars studying these and related groups are often concerned with issues of ethnicity and diaspora - two concepts that are intimately intertwined. Scholars have long examined productions of ethnicity by individuals who have undertaken diasporic journeys (Appadurai 1996, Back 1995, Cohen 1997, Clifford 1994, Gilroy 1987, Hall 1993, Knowles 2006, Song 1999). Much has been done about the way ethnicity is made (Hall 1993, Solomos and Back 1996), and its importance in the everyday lives of individuals (Song 1999, Knowles 2003). However, the sociological literature on ethnicity-making by diasporic individuals continues to be lacking in three important aspects. The first is a lack of precision in accounting for the many different ways individuals of the “same” diaspora make their ethnicity. Diasporic ethnicities, even hybridised ones, remain as single-faceted in their resources as the diasporas they are categorised under (Cohen 1997, Gilroy 1993, Patterson 1977). Sociology becomes a blunt tool that does not fully interrogate the migratory experiences of diasporic individuals (Amit and Rapport 2002).

The second is an over-focus in the Anglo-American sociological literature on *specific* groups of diasporic individuals, especially those pertaining to African (Gilroy 1993) points of departure. Although some work has been done on migratory routes out of China (Parker 1995, Song 1999), these have been comparatively less. The need to understand diasporic experiences from other points of departure is becoming increasingly important given the shift of political and economic power from the United State and Europe to other parts of the world and especially China, where an outflow of migrants has over the past two decades increased exponentially (Poston et al 1994). Thirdly, the literature on productions of diasporic ethnicities

has tended to focus on minority social groups of migrants dwelling in a larger host society espousing a contrasting ethnicity (Hall 1993, Solomos and Back 1996). Little attention has been paid to productions of ethnicity amongst migrant groups constituting their own host society nation-state and who still retain diasporic memories. We know little of the mechanisms through which ethnicity is made in these circumstances.

In this thesis I intend to address these shortfalls. My contribution to sociology will be to the literature on both diaspora and ethnicity. I will redefine diaspora to remove its collectivist tendencies and remake diasporic space to account for an individual's diasporic experiences, journeys and memories of past, present and future migrations. I will shift attention towards the migratory routes of individuals out of China, accounting for both past journeys as well as present outflows. Through my chosen field, I will also address the gap in sociological knowledge about ethnicity-making in migrant-turned-host situations, as well as present a more nuanced picture of "the Chinese diaspora". I will also remake ethnicity to better *fit* with this reconfigured diasporic space.

Finally, I will examine the mechanisms by which ethnicity is made amongst my informants. Understanding *how* ethnicity is made is crucial because it exposes the character of ethnicity itself. If ethnicity is, as I will argue in chapter 2, a journey of social trajectories, then understanding the directions and pathways of those trajectories will help us to understand the journey. I will explore instances of aesthetic juxtaposition and contrast, and examine how commercialised activities can and do texture the way individuals make ethnicity. I will conclude by explaining how an individual's economic life-path, defined here as her potential and actual ability to accrue economic wealth, is affected by the way she makes ethnicity. I will show that my thesis has granted new insights into how ethnicity is made, both in and beyond my chosen field of study, having potential resonance for other groups of diasporic individuals.

In this introductory chapter I will argue that conceptions of diaspora, diasporic space and ethnicity are insufficient in their current forms to account for ethnicity making amongst Chinese Singaporeans. Chinese Singaporeans in this thesis are defined as individuals who identify themselves as Chinese and hold Singaporean citizenship or permanent residency. I will first outline the reasons as to why diasporic space needs to be reconfigured into *transdiasporic* space. By creating a different way of seeing diaspora and diasporic space, I will argue that current forms of ethnicity need to be extended and reconfigured into forms of *transdiasporic ethnicity*. I will then give a brief outline of chapters in this thesis, my original contributions and finally an overview of the practical social problems that this thesis will address.

The Problem of Diaspora and Ethnicity in Singapore

I have chosen to identify gaps in the sociological literature on ethnicity and diaspora by starting with social problems that are lived and real¹. These problems are grounded in the way race and ethnicity, specifically Chineseness, are treated in the nation-state of Singapore by the state, its citizens and by academics. It bears real consequences for individuals already living in Singapore as well as the increasing numbers of new migrants from China. Before I discuss these problems, it is necessary to understand just *how* race and ethnicity plays a part in the lives of Chinese Singaporeans.

Race and Ethnicity in the form of Chineseness are at the core of being a Chinese Singaporean. The nation-state of Singapore was founded on racial and ethnic politics, after gaining independence as a minority Chinese state from a majority Malay Federation (Lian 1995). Its history as a British Colony has also meant that it shared in Empire-making, itself being primarily a “race story” (Knowles 2003:119). Today, Chinese Singaporeans face challenging questions about their racial and ethnic identities. In the last 50 years, they have seen themselves transformed from a sojourning, minority ethnic community in a British colony (Wang 1991) to a minority racial state in a Malay Federation (Lian 1995) to the majority host society in their own nation-state (Poston et al 1994).

Diaspora, Diasporic Space and Transdiasporic Space

Singapore’s story makes current forms of *diaspora* and *diasporic space* as explanatory concepts problematic. Chinese Singaporeans are often referred to as part of the “*Chinese diaspora*” (Ang 2001, Cohen 1997, Wang 1991), and the making of their Chineseness is often seen to take place in a diasporic space. But diaspora in its current form is often a macro-collectivist term that occurs under the shadow of a host society with contrasting ethnic identifications. It is often used as a way to categorise groups of individuals separated over large distances (Cohen 1997, Safran 1991) or as a grouping of ideas or cultures (Clifford 1994, Gilroy 1987) or even as a connected consciousness creating imagined communities (Anderson 2006, Appadurai 1996). Conceptions of diaspora and diasporic space also often take place in situations where social groups of migrants are a minority population in a host society that espouses a *different* ethnicity from them (Back 1995, Gilroy 1987, Knowles 2006, Parker 1995, Song 1999). Little work has been done about immigrants with diasporic links who now form their own host society, nor has much attention been paid to the *connections* between *individualised* diasporic journeys.

¹ The identification of the problems comes from both my own lived experiences growing up in Singapore, as well as my professional practice as a commercial wedding photographer. Throughout this thesis, I will draw largely upon my 13 years of wedding photography to create insights into the larger social condition of Singaporeans, and especially Chinese Singaporeans.

The social lives and circumstances of Chinese Singaporeans suggest that *Diaspora* and *Diasporic Space* need to be reconsidered and modified. Using diaspora as a macro-collectivist term only serves to valorise the Singaporean state's attempts at creating a single definition of "Chinese" (Kong and Yeoh 2003). Chinese Singaporeans do not face racism or marginalisation in the way that other minority Chinese groups around the world do (Parker 1995, Song 1999, 2003). They do not have to shape their racial or ethnic identities against the backdrop of a dominant host society's contrasting culture. Instead, their struggle is with themselves and with state-defined categories of Chineseness. State policy on race and ethnicity obscures the heterogeneous ethnic identities espoused by Chinese Singaporeans (Ang 2001) by creating homogeneous "races" (Kong and Yeoh 2003). In order to subvert these political discourses we need to see each individual's different diasporic journeys, memories and experiences.

Furthermore, the *continued* journeys and movements of Singaporeans and Chinese Singaporeans in particular raise questions about the efficacy of creating *single categories* of ethnic diasporas (e.g. *the Chinese diaspora*, or *the Jewish diaspora*) (Cohen 1997, Safran 1991) and single points of origin / departure (Gilroy 1987). Although only 45 years old as a nation-state, Chinese Singaporeans are already engaging in "next-step" migratory patterns and have leap-frogged to other parts of the world, especially the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and China (Ang 2001). Diaspora as a "catch-all" category (Amit 2002) cannot sufficiently explain these social trends.

There is a need to rethink the social space of Chinese Singaporeans. I propose that diasporic space needs to be reconceptualised as *transdiasporic space*. Transdiasporic space is a collection of individuals' diasporas, where diaspora is redefined as a personal set of *everyday journeys, experiences and memories* – past, present and future. Individuals' diasporas are not anchored to any single overarching group (Safran 1991) or even a transnational community of shared interests (Clifford 1994, Gilroy 1987), but are open to future journeys and allegiances. In the case of Chinese Singaporeans, transdiasporic space encapsulates an individual's migrant point of departure, her present position in a globalised world, as well as her potential future migratory movements - not necessarily as a Chinese Singaporean, but as whatever she chooses to make herself to be. Transdiasporic space acts as a set of *personal and individualised resources* from which individuals draw their ethnic identifications from. It is both personal in that it is personally configured by an individual but it is also social because it takes into account the overlapping of different personal journeys between individuals. Transdiasporic space transcends national borders in favour of spaces that individuals themselves have configured.

Ethnicity in Transdiasporic Space – Transdiasporic Ethnicity

Sociological, political and popular discourse has continued to connect diasporas with specific ethnic groups (Clifford 1994, Safran 1991). This intertwining means that sociologists interested in the life experiences of diasporic individuals often interrogate the continuous shaping of diasporic ethnicities (Tuan 1998). However, the literature on diasporic ethnicities shares similar issues with the literature on diasporas. The most important of these is an oversimplification of sources of ethnicity for points of departure unfamiliar to European and American academics. Scholars who write about a particular diaspora and diasporic ethnicities often fail to engage with the subtleties and nuances of regional differences from an individual's point of departure, and this is especially so in the case of Chinese migrants (Ang 2001, Cohen 1997). Even when looking at hybridised or syncretised forms of ethnicity (Hall 1993), there is still a tendency to relate to sources as being overly homogeneous and flat (Gilroy 1987).

This simplification of sources cannot account for the multiply nuanced resources of Singaporean Chineseness. The matrices of ethnic identifications available to Chinese Singaporeans are wide and varied. These matrices are personalised, individualised, and often work under the radar of "homogeneous-homeland" frameworks. Ethnic identifications are drawn from Singapore's position as a global trading partner, particularly with the "West" (Ang 2001) as well as other major economies like China, India and Japan (Chua 2003). At the same time, ethnic identifications are drawn from migratory memories that are still fresh in the minds of many Chinese Singaporeans, some of whom still claim "first-wave" (Wang 1991) immigrant status. These varieties of identifications, as well as the different life-paths of individuals mean that each individual's diasporic experiences, journeys and memories are different and unique, creating different versions of Singaporean Chineseness.

Our considerations of diasporic ethnicities need to go beyond looking at homelands and settlement (Davidson and Kuah-Pearce 2008, Safran 1991), or mass movements of ideology that unite groups of people (Anderson 2006, Appadurai 1996). It is instead more important to see diasporic ethnicity and its sources, shapes and formations from an individual's perspective because an individual perspective grants us insights and details often overlooked in structural or systemic processes (Evans 1993, Knowles 2003). Whilst a simplification of sources does not completely discount previous work on diasporic ethnicities, it does call into question the *accuracy* of the building blocks we as sociologists analyse when examining diasporic ethnicities. Although it would be impossible to take into account *all* the resources of available to diasporic individuals, it would still be advantageous to focus on an individual's *personal* set of ethnic identifications and *personal* way of producing her ethnicity.

This focus on the individual has been partly addressed in studies of ethnicity in general (Hall 1992, Knowles 2003, Solomos and Back 1996). But the way ethnicity is made here is problematic as well, in that it does not pay sufficient attention to the *directions* and *pathways* of diasporic individuals. Current conceptions of ethnicity work around the individual as a postmodern subject (Hall 1988) whose identity is never permanently fixed and is constantly changing. In this sense ethnicity is a non-static and fleeting *process* (Solomos and Back 1996). As a process, ethnicity can also be understood on a micro-social level of personal subjectivities (Knowles 2003). This take on ethnicity focuses on the everyday practices of individuals, their material environment, and once again a sense of change. Ethnicity from this point of view is something that is constantly in flux, and where individuals' ethnic identities are constantly being made and remade on an everyday basis.

Transdiasporic space exposes the weakness of seeing ethnicity as a *process*. Transdiasporic space brings into focus an individual's pathways in life. These pathways involve *movement* with *direction*. An individual is constantly undertaking different social trajectories that bring her closer to or further away from different people, spaces, objects, ideas and lifestyles. Ethnicity as a process implies movement but not necessarily direction. It does not take into account an individual's progression or regression in everyday life. It does not capture the presentness and pastness of an individual's fears, hopes, ambitions, plans or desires, nor does it acknowledge an individual's life paths. Although not wrong, ethnicity as a process needs to take into account the presence of *social trajectories*.

Transdiasporic Ethnicity as a Journey of Personal Social Trajectories

In order to address these shortfalls, I argue that it is necessary to recast diasporic ethnicity as *transdiasporic ethnicity* – defined as ethnicity that is formed and shaped within transdiasporic space. I propose that transdiasporic ethnicity needs to be seen as a *journey of personal social trajectories that is made tangible in the use of aesthetic markers*. The metaphor of a personal journey (and corresponding *experiences*) addresses both the need to look at diasporic ethnicities on a personal scale, as well as to focus on the *movements* (both socially and physically) of migrants. The pathways of Chinese individuals in Singapore involve journeys and experiences of physical movement (Wang 1991) as well as rapid changes to their economic, social and cultural lives (Chua 2003, Cohen 1997). For them, their ethnicities are not just made and remade, but have a past, present and future, are traceable and can be (and have been) constructed into maps and stories (Ang 2001, Lian 1995). This does not mean that transdiasporic ethnicity as a journey is linear or deterministic. Journeys can be fragmented, random, start and stop. But as a *journey*, transdiasporic ethnicity becomes more than just another performed process, it becomes something that can be worked through, experienced and lived.

My use of *social trajectories* encapsulates the diasporic experiences of migrants and other individuals who have migrated and/or may migrate again. Experience is particularly important in this thesis because it reveals the sociological memories of diasporic individuals, and their life-paths which continue to inform their everyday decisions and actions. Social trajectories also account for the various ways we interact and associate with other individuals and the various things and ideas that surround us in everyday life. It encapsulates the sense of *movement* – individuals are never static in their social or physical positions, but their movements must come with direction. A *trajectory* implies that these movements are somehow being *steered* towards or away from other individuals, lifestyles, objects and ideas.

Finally, I have chosen to ground my observations of productions of transdiasporic ethnicity in the visual and material environments of everyday life where individuals dwell (Ingold 2000). Scholars have noted how individuals use aesthetic markers like clothing, jewellery, food, housing, or signboards to mark and perform their ethnicity (Farrar 1997, Knowles 2003, Soja 1989). In this way, productions of ethnicity are made tangible and observable to researchers. My choice of aesthetic markers focuses both on their position in individuals' lives as well as their use (Buchli 2002). This is not to say that aesthetic markers are statically located and individuals steer their social trajectories towards or away from them, but rather they are part of a fluid and ever-changing social and material landscape that forms the stage on which ethnicity is produced.

Transdiasporic ethnicity thus acknowledges the unique memories, ambitions and experiences of each individual who operates within transdiasporic space. It accounts for the different directions an individual has steered, steers and may steer her social trajectories. But even if we are able to discern the *character* of transdiasporic ethnicity, it is still not clear as to how the journey is *made*. In what directions are social trajectories steered? What processes influence these directions? What implications will these have both on an individual's ethnicity, her social life and the social lives of the individuals around her? It is in this framework that I propose my research question.

Research Question and Chapter Outline

“How is Singaporean Chineseness made by individuals in Transdiasporic Space?”

Singaporean Chineseness is the primary form of transdiasporic ethnicity that I have studied in this thesis. Thus when I write about Singaporean Chineseness I am also referring to transdiasporic ethnicity and vice-versa, unless I explicitly make a distinction. As a matter of shorthand, when I refer to ethnicity-making by Chinese Singaporeans, I am also referring to transdiasporic ethnicity². By “making” Singaporean Chineseness I am referring to the *mechanisms* and *methods* by which transdiasporic ethnicities are *formed*, *shaped* and *ascribed*. It is thus not just about how individuals hold onto or create Chineseness; it is how this Chineseness changes over time, and how they shape other forms of Chineseness around them as well.

It should be noted that this study of racial and ethnic production is not primarily about the Singaporean state. Enough work has been done by scholars with regards to state policy and its ramifications for Singaporeans - Chinese or otherwise. Instead, this thesis is about the competing productions of Chineseness that occur amongst *individuals* in Singapore. The key word here is *individual*. I am not seeking to create categories of Chineseness between social groups. Rather, I am looking for the micro-social textures (Knowles 2003) of race and ethnicity amongst Chinese Singaporeans – an *individual* Chineseness. The study of the individual has become increasingly important because it re-established people and not systems as the building blocks of society. As Evans (1993:6) points out, “if the social sciences continue to reject the individual, then they leave the individual completely out of society”. Furthermore, “a study of the individual illustrates the social, and re-affirms the centrality of certain general themes in the lives of all particular individuals” (Evans 1993:8).

In Chapter 1, I will set out what exactly I mean by *transdiasporic space*. I will argue that the historical, political, social and economic circumstances surrounding Singapore mean that concepts of diaspora are inadequately mapping out the social lives of Chinese Singaporeans and Singaporeans in general. Diaspora as a way of describing a social group of people (Gilroy 1987) ignores the different personal journeys and experiences of individuals. Transdiasporic space recasts diaspora as sets of personal journeys and experiences (Clifford 1994) with overlapping and shared features. It allows us to see social spaces not as that defined by national borders, but by the individual. Transdiasporic space acts as a space and resource from which individuals draw their ethnic identifications.

² At the same time, my findings may have a wider resonance for other studies of diasporic individuals, which I will consider in my conclusion (chapter 10).

In chapter 2, I will argue that ethnicity is *made* in the social intimacies and distances between individuals and the ethnic lifestyles they espouse. I will first argue that current conceptions of ethnicity are also unsatisfactory in accounting for the makings of Singaporean Chineseness. I will argue that ethnicity as a process (Solomos and Black 1996, Hall 1993) of personal subjectivities (Knowles 2003) needs to be extended into a *journey of personal trajectories*. Seeing ethnicity in this way better accounts for the constant movement of individuals, both physically and socially. The “journey” analogy also better encapsulates an individual’s feelings of settlement and staticness in life, despite never knowing if she will move tomorrow.

I will define ethnic lifestyles as sets and practices of aesthetic markers that individuals use to espouse their ethnic identifications. Drawing terminology from Bourdieu (1984) and Bottero (2005) I will argue that individuals *steer* their social trajectories towards or away from other individuals and lifestyles they may like or dislike. I will argue that the navigation of these directions are regulated by what I term to be *ethnic tastes* – defined as aesthetic, visual judgements about the aesthetic markers (Knowles 2003) that individuals use to make their ethnic lifestyles known to others. Much of this thesis will be about uncovering the social processes that affect ethnic taste, because it is in the way taste is affected that social distances are widened or closed, and thus where ethnicity is made.

In chapter 3, I will argue that Singaporean Chinese wedding rituals are a highly efficacious site in which one can observe ethnicity-making. This is because weddings are concentrated bursts of activity that extend and mimic the diasporic journeys and everyday lives of Chinese Singaporeans. I will argue that Singaporean Chinese weddings are a crossroads where diasporic journeys and everyday life intersect, clash and become entangled, and in doing so become *microcosms of transdiasporic space*. They mimic and become a simulacrum for everyday life because of their highly consociative (Dyck 2000) and disjunctive nature (Amit 2002). Finally, they are highly material-centric, becoming a stage upon which material performances like conspicuous consumption, ritual and commercial activities intersect and interact.

In chapter 4, I will outline the methodological steps I have taken to conduct my research. I have chosen to transform my professional practice of wedding photography into a *visually-focussed form of participant observation*. This entails three things – the use of camera which acts a fulcrum upon which interaction between researcher and informant occur, the creation of visual field notes, and the production of images as integral and not peripheral to data. This method creates an immersive, tactile and multi-sensory environment in which I can base my observations of individuals’ use of aesthetic markers. I will trace the steps I have taken since starting wedding photography in 1997 and turning professional in 2003, and how it led to my interest in the social issues displayed in wedding rituals. I will also note how I will include aspects of my own lived experiences as a Chinese Singaporean by integrating poetry as

semi-autobiographical text into my presentation of photographs (which I will discuss in chapter 5). I will also discuss my use of semi-structured and unstructured interviews, online wedding forums and photography as methodological tools. Finally, I will consider the ethical issues of the thesis, noting especially copyright and privacy concerns.

In Chapter 5 I will establish a methodological framework where photography as *visual poetry* can be integrated into social research. I will argue that the use of photographs in social research, whilst growing, remains largely superficial with a few exceptions (Back 2004, Knowles and Harper 2009). I will provide a toolbox and a vocabulary in which photography can be read and used by sociologists, reflecting upon my own visual practice and the photographers who have influenced my work. I will argue that photographs as visual poetry are cryptically descriptive, aesthetically evocative, infinitely encoded and visually confrontational, and act as an immersive, revelatory and reflexive element in understanding productions of transdiasporic ethnicity. I will also explain how I will use my photographs in this thesis and argue for the use of poetry and poetic text as captions in photographs.

In chapter 6 I will present a *visual map* of Singaporean Chineseness, contextualising and visualising the material and social spaces in which Singaporean Chineseness is produced. I will draw upon my professional photographic practice to create a journey for the reader, starting from the intimate and lived spaces of individuals to the enveloping cityscapes and high-rise flats of Singapore. I will intersperse the photographs with semi-autobiographical poetry (Evans 1993) both written specifically for the map, as well as from my second book of poetry covering my travels and my life in Singapore (Heng 2004).

Chapter 7 acts as a staging chapter to chapters 8 and 9. In chapter 7 I will show how individuals make their ethnic lifestyles known to others through *taste performances*. Taste performances are *an individual's outward-facing sets of practices and actions that expose and express her ethnic lifestyles to other individuals*. Taste performances are ambiguous in that they are perceived and reacted to differently by different individuals. Individuals may choose to like or dislike taste performances and the ethnic lifestyles attached to these performances. The result of these likes/dislikes is a steering of social trajectories towards/away from ethnic lifestyles, resulting in ethnicity being made. The processes that encourage a like/dislike reaction will be what I will examine in chapter 8. I will also explain how certain ethnic lifestyles (and the taste performances that reveal them) have become interlinked with different levels of economic wealth, suggesting a relationship between economic ambitions and ethnicity-making. I will explore this aspect in chapter 9. I will also map out two socially prominent ethnic lifestyles that were initially politically-defined but are now part of popular discourse amongst Chinese Singaporeans – namely “heartlander” and “cosmopolitan” lifestyles. These lifestyles are not static but remain fluid in what kind of aesthetic markers they encompass, but are often used in a caricatured manner by my informants when attributing certain practices and

artefacts. They are often held in tension against each other, and will be used in this thesis to explain the way social intimacies and distances are created when Singaporean Chineseness is produced.

Chapters 8 and 9 examine the processes that shape ethnic tastes. In chapter 8 I will argue that ethnic taste is influenced and affected by *aesthetic dissonance*, which is defined as a *process by which taste performances or aesthetic markers are contrasted and juxtaposed against each other, resulting in individuals making taste decisions that shape their ethnic tastes*. Aesthetic dissonance shapes ethnic tastes in multi-scalar and multi-sensory ways, and its effects can occur when individuals both experience and anticipate it. In Singaporean Chinese weddings, aesthetic dissonance tends to result more in social distances rather than intimacies. These distances are made through a competition for aesthetic dominance, where individuals compete for how a wedding should “look”. This competition gives rise to aesthetic territorialisation (where individuals, artefacts and practices are segregated to prevent dissonance but end up accentuating differences) and participant intervention, where some participants suddenly and unexpectedly intervene in a wedding, disrupting scripts and creating social distances. However, not all dissonance leads to distance. Depending on the circumstances of the wedding as well as the social relationships between individuals, some aesthetic dissonance can and does lead to social intimacies.

In Chapter 9 I will examine the ramifications of ethnic commercialism on aesthetic dissonance. *Everyday commercial transactions* serve to perpetuate existing links between certain ethnic lifestyles (forms of Chineseness) and levels of economic wealth. These transactions involve the *production, marketing and consumption* of aesthetic markers. I will argue that individuals who engage in everyday commercial transactions (both producers and consumers) contribute towards a *commercially dominant aesthetic norm*. This aesthetic norm is tied into displays of conspicuous consumption, leading some socially and economically aspirational individuals to strive for aesthetic dominance in a wedding, leading to instances of aesthetic dissonance. The result is that “heartland” lifestyles continue to be linked to low levels of economic wealth and “cosmopolitan” lifestyles continue to be linked to higher levels of economic wealth. These linkages subsequently affect the desirability of different ethnic lifestyles to different individuals, whose ethnic tastes will also be affected. However, it remains very much dependent on the individual as to *how* these linkages will eventually affect her tastes.

In chapter 10 I will summarise my findings and extend my contributions (the first part follows this section). I will argue that my final contribution comes in the form of aesthetic dissonance as a mechanism by which ethnicity is made through ethnic taste, social distances and aesthetic juxtaposition. I will argue that ethnicity *is not just made in everyday life, but especially in the flashpoints and intense encounters of everyday life*. I will then explore the

ramifications of aesthetic dissonance, showing what it suggests for studies of ethnic hybridity/syncretism amongst diasporic individuals. I will also argue that my findings in the commercial life of ethnicised individuals suggest that as researchers we need to examine both the *production* and *consumption* of aesthetic markers, rather than focussing our attention on the latter. I will also argue that an individual's ability to accrue economic wealth is significantly affected by the way she makes ethnicity, owing to the connections that ethnic lifestyles have with conspicuous consumption and the social distances made because of these connections. Finally, I will examine future areas for research (the wider quotidian existence of Singaporean Chinese, as well as how aesthetic dissonance and commercialised ethnicities may be applied elsewhere), limitations (geographic and technical) and make my concluding statements.

The epilogue brings together my arguments, findings, contributions and conclusions into an *expressive and visual finale*. In the epilogue I will present a visual biography of a particular group of informants who exist both on the periphery of the wedding as well as society. They are first and second-generation Chinese Singaporeans, many of whom made the actual diasporic journey from China to Singapore. Their ethnic lifestyles have become dissonant with the wider and more affluent lives of Chinese Singaporeans. My photographs (and layered poetry) work as a way of re-connecting them with public consciousness on an emotional level.

Contributions

The overall contribution that I am making comes in the form of reconfiguring diaspora, diasporic space and diasporic ethnicity into a more nuanced, finer-tuned version of personal diasporas, transdiasporic space and transdiasporic ethnicity. I will argue that this *better* accounts for the journeys, experiences and memories of individuals. By configuring transdiasporic ethnicity, I argue that this presents a more textured and nuanced way for understanding how diasporic individuals make their ethnicity, and at the same time provides a way to avoid political and academic collectivist notions. By configuring ethnic taste I am adding to the toolbox of ethnicity scholars who wish to understand the making of ethnicity from the way individuals act and interact. Finally, my choice of field, the wedding and my visually-focussed methodological approach makes two important contributions – I will display the efficacy of using small concentrated bursts of activity to depict mundane everyday life, and I will have created a methodological framework in which photographs can be better read and used in social research. I will deal with these contributions briefly here and in more detail in my conclusion.

Main Contributions to Diaspora, Diasporic Space and Diasporic Ethnicity

I offer a reconfiguration of diaspora in the form of transdiasporic space. Transdiasporic space resolves the problem of seeing many individuals belonging to a single category of ethnic diaspora. It recentres our observations onto the individual and the individual's experience of diaspora. Changing our perception of diaspora moves our attention away from single point departures and settlements to concepts of multiple homes and journeys. As individuals continue to move from one geographical point to another, oftentimes settling in many different places over the course of their lives, we need new ways to discuss what could be a "post-diasporic" movement.

I will also contribute to the literature on ethnicity by improving the way we see ethnicity and how ethnicity is made. Ethnicity has often been seen to be continuous and non-static, but the analogy of *process* (Hall 1993) hides the mental, physical and social trajectories and paths that individuals take. I offer a view of ethnicity as a *journey*, an analogy that arises from the "leap-frog" movements of individuals, who no longer migrate to a single place to settle, instead creating multiple "homes" and points of departure. But even if individuals do not physically move, their identities and identifications constantly change. Sometimes these paths diverge, sometimes they go backwards, and sometimes there is no destination, but at all times an individual is "moving". Seeing ethnicity as a journey allows us to capture a sense of this "movement".

My version of how ethnicity is made borrows vocabulary from Bourdieu (1984) and other researchers in social stratification, like that of Bottero (2005) and Prandy (2002). At the heart of this contribution is the idea that ethnicity is made in social intimacies and distances, and the concept of *ethnic taste*. Seeing ethnicity in social intimacies and distances makes ethnicity in everyday life real and observable. We know that ethnicity is found in everyday life, but it is difficult to make that material and tactile. Individuals who create social intimacies and distances between each other are engaging in practical, observable actions that involve material objects (aesthetic markers). By doing this they open their social world to researchers, allowing us in to understand *their* way of doing things.

Ethnic taste formalises the difficult task that researchers face when informants talk about "liking" or "disliking" things. In situations involving conflict between ethnicities, informants may be unable to explain their actions other than their "dislike" or distaste of other ethnic groups or lifestyles. Ethnic taste opens a door to aesthetics and the visual, and the judgements that individuals make about each others' visual appearance and use of aesthetic markers. It places the researcher firmly in the realm of practical everyday assessments that individuals make about each other. As individuals we navigate much of our lives visually, and ethnic taste brings the visual into our toolboxes of social analysis.

Finally, I offer aesthetic dissonance as a new way of seeing ethnicity-making. I will expand on this contribution in chapter 10, after I have properly mapped out aesthetic dissonance in chapters 7, 8 and 9.

Sub-Contributions to choice of Fields of Study and Methodology

Another sub-contribution comes in the form of weddings as a field of *sociological* analysis. Weddings have been used by various disciplines like anthropology (van Gennep 1960), marketing and organisational behaviour (Otnes and Lowrey 1993, Grimes 2000). But its appearance in the sociological literature is relatively rare. Whether this is a case of access, genre exclusivity or otherwise remains to be seen, but my use of weddings is a way of bringing it into the sociological imagination. Weddings are rich, concentrated events that are a window into the social lives of individuals. To ignore it is to ignore an opportunity to interrogate the quotidian existence of our informants in an efficient and effective manner.

My methodological contributions come in the form of visual methods in ethnographic practice and the use and understanding of photographs in sociological research. If ethnic taste enhances or introduces the visual in our sociological toolboxes, then photographs make the visual as a sociological tool real. By reconfiguring a photograph to be seen as a *visual poem*, I am enriching the potential interpretations that readers of photographs in sociological text can create. I am also enlarging our sociological vocabulary when trying to make sense of a photograph, and creating further inroads into the potential interdisciplinary connections between poetry, photography and sociology. Seeing photography as poetry allows us to draw on strengths from a discipline where exposing the makings of race and ethnicity is second-nature.

This thesis also carries other contributions, particularly to do with insights into ethnicity and hybridity or syncretism, the life-paths of aesthetic markers and the connections between an individual's economic well-being and her ethnic lifestyles. These contributions will only make sense at the end of the thesis when I have mapped out transdiasporic space, social trajectories, ethnic lifestyles and tastes and aesthetic dissonance.

Importance of this Thesis to Social Realities in Singapore

The need to understand how Singaporean Chineseness is made is crucial for several reasons. The first is to address growing social and economic divides which appear to have an ethnic texture. Certain kinds of Chineseness are, and continue to have strong links to levels of economic wealth and social prestige in Singapore. Chinese Singaporeans who speak English, hold white collar jobs, are well-educated and travelled are termed "Cosmopolitans" whereas Chinese Singaporeans who speak Mandarin or a Chinese Dialect, hold blue-collar jobs, are

not well-educated and not well-travelled are termed “Heartlanders”, with reference to the government-subsidised housing estates they dwell in (Chua 2003). Understanding how ethnicity is made will help us to understand how it is subsequently linked to different parts of the economic and social hierarchy.

The second reason lies behind increased levels of immigration from China and the resulting tensions between “locals” and “newcomers”. In order to compensate for falling birth rates, the state has turned to immigration as one of its alternatives³. But newly arrived migrants have found themselves held in tension with established locals, similar to situations that Tuan (1998) noticed about new Chinese immigrants to the United States. For the first time since it became a nation-state, Chinese Singaporeans must confront a social group that is both similar yet vastly different to them. “Mainland Chinese” immigrants espouse different forms of Chineseness, and claim to be Chinese as well. These tensions are amplified when such immigrants also seek permanent residency or citizenship, and the question of whether they are, or can be “truly Singaporean” preoccupies the popular imagination. It is thus necessary to see how Chineseness is made in Singapore so as to understand how different versions of Chineseness can arise, and how these different versions are held in tension with each other.

Finally, I argue for the need to understand how Chineseness is made in Singapore because of the potential for the exclusion of individuals. Social and economic exclusion already exist in both cases above. Singapore’s relentless pursuit for economic progress since independence and its policy of creating a homogeneous Chinese category has meant an entire generation of Chinese Singaporeans finding themselves foreign in an adopted homeland. Individuals who spoke dialect as a first language found themselves out of sync and out of place in a country that rapidly adopted English as a business language to deal with the West (Kong and Yeoh 2003). As one informant put it, when speaking of her grandmother

“After awhile, my grandmother wouldn’t even step out of the house, because it’s just like being in a foreign land, with everyone speaking a different language. I think it’s pretty scary for someone to be in a situation like that.” Evi, 30, Lawyer and Bride-to-be

Chinese Singaporeans also continue to express their resentment not just at Mainland Chinese immigrants, but at the state for “allowing” them into the country. Exclusionary practices in the form of xenophobic discourse already permeate popular media, as evidenced in this passage from the Temasek Review – a pro-opposition and anti-immigration online publication.

³ http://www.workpermit.com/news/2006_08_22/global/singapore_needs_immigrants.htm

“The myopic and flawed immigration policies of the ruling party pertaining to immigrants from mainland China will have disastrous consequences for Singapore in the long run.

Now that they have allowed so many mainland Chinese into the country, we will have no choice but to live with them and knowing the near impossible task of integrating them, tensions between the two communities will inevitably rise and threaten the social fabric of the nation eventually.”⁴ – Temasek Review (2010)

The author in the article also labels Mainland Chinese immigrants as predatory creatures and argues that their integration into Singapore is impossible. The same website contains videos and articles arranged to show the worst possible behaviour of Mainland Chinese immigrants⁵, commonly referred to as PRCs⁶. Visitors to the website leave comments that support the social exclusion of Mainland Chinese immigrants

i really sick (sic) of those PRC. it is their culture to speak loudly, behave rudely and others thing. we can say that they have different culture with us. but scolding old granny, this is gone too far...i hope they are just tourist, not our new citizens or PR. - burntbread⁷

It is imperative for us to engage with ethnicity and the making of Singaporean Chineseness before these practices of social exclusion worsen or possibly beget practices of violence. This thesis does not just engage and extend the literature on ethnicity and diaspora, but also exists as a form of action against everyday forms of social injustice.

Conclusion

The Singaporean state faces a difficult decision. Like many other nation-states, it struggles to support an ageing economy without new migrants. But immigration policies are very rarely popular amongst established locals (Tuan 1998, Song 1999, Smith 1995), and this is no exception for Chinese Singaporeans, who ironically are either migrants themselves or have some sort of migration story from their past. Added to this is a widening income and social gap between individuals that carries a distinct ethnic texture (Chua 2003). The need to understand how ethnicity is made is crucial, for without it we cannot confront and arrest the

⁴ <http://www.temasekreview.com/2010/01/21/can-singapore-ever-integrate-mainland-chinese-with-no-sense-of-the-rule-of-law/comment-page-4/>

⁵ <http://www.temasekreview.com/2010/02/02/video-two-prc-ladies-scolding-singaporean-old-lady-selling-flowers-at-kwan-im-tong-temple/>

⁶ PRC is an acronym for People’s Republic of China – its use to describe Mainland Chinese individuals suggests an act of separation between “China” Chineseness and “Singaporean” Chineseness.

⁷ <http://www.temasekreview.com/2010/02/02/video-two-prc-ladies-scolding-singaporean-old-lady-selling-flowers-at-kwan-im-tong-temple/>

social distances that individuals are creating between each other. To ignore this is to be negligent as social researchers, for our role is to exist within the social sphere and for the good of the individuals we study.

The place in which we make our understandings must be in the same place that social exclusion occurs, that is, the everyday practical actions of individuals. I have chosen the wedding to situate my study of Chineseness not just because of the way it mimics everyday life and transdiasporic space, but also because of the deep links that I have with the ritual. I have been photographing Chinese weddings in Singapore on a professional basis for more than 10 years, totaling more than 75 weddings spanning the social, material and economic breadth and depth of contemporary Chinese Singaporean society. I have photographed everything from small civil ceremonies to quiet family gatherings to ostentatious banquets spanning several days. Each wedding has a story to tell about Singaporean Chineseness, and together they weave a coherent fabric of ethnicity making in a transdiasporic space.

Chapter 1: Configuring Singapore as Transdiasporic Space

Introduction and Overview

The primary focus of this thesis is on how ethnicity is produced by Chinese Singaporeans in Singapore. However, it is not possible to interrogate these productions of ethnicity, nor make a reasonable discussion about ethnicity without first establishing the social space in which Chinese Singaporeans dwell and interact. This chapter maps out the social spaces of Singapore by reconfiguring concepts of diaspora and diasporic space to better account for the lives and realities of Chinese Singaporeans. I will first justify Singapore as my chosen field of study, arguing that the Anglo-American literature on diaspora and ethnicity have paid too much attention to minority ethnic groups in majority host societies, and have focussed most of their efforts on social spaces in North America and Europe. I will then argue that current conceptions of diaspora and diasporic space have several inherent weaknesses, owing much to diaspora's conceptualisation as a unifying charter of ethnic identity (see Amit 2002). I will show how Singapore's social, historical and political processes have further complicated these weaknesses, and why it is necessary to redefine diaspora and reconfigure diasporic space into transdiasporic space.

Shifting the Focus of Diaspora Literature: The Case for Chinese Singaporeans

When dealing with groups of diasporic individuals, scholars have tended to focus on *minority* ethnic groups who dwell within a larger majority host society, and who seldom wield political power within their point of settlement (Clifford 1994, Eade 1997, Gilroy 1987, Hall 1991, Safran 1991). This focus on "minority-within-majority" situations exposes an imbalanced amount of attention paid by Anglo-American scholars on specific groups of diasporic individuals whose points of departure tend to be from Africa or the Indian sub-continent, and whose points of settlement tend to be the same location that a particular scholar dwells in. There are some exceptions (Knowles and Harper 2009, Song 1999, Parker 1995, Takenaka 1999) but they are also relatively few. This problem is of course partly practical – we tend to be most concerned with the *immediate* social situations that surround us. But it also means that we are ignoring a wealth of diasporic experiences and journeys that concern the rest of the world, and could very well give us greater insights into our own immediate social environments.

Focussing on specific diasporas also means we ignore the changing geopolitical processes at work in contemporary globalisation, especially the increasing importance of China as a global economic and political power. With this rise of power we are witnessing a rise in migration out

of China into the rest of the world (Poston et al 1994). Scholars have long been concerned with “the Chinese diaspora” (Cohen 1997) and the resulting social groups of Chinese individuals in the United Kingdom (Parker 1995, Song 1999), United States (Tuan 1998) and other parts of the world (Chan and Tong 2001, Kwong 1987, Waldinger and Tseng 1992). One popular angle of understanding diasporic Chinese ethnicity has been to analyse the business and commercial networks developed by Chinese migrants and what this says about Chinese group identity (Patterson 1975). But again, the focus has largely been on groups of Chinese individuals in North America and Europe. Not enough is being done to account for the migratory paths of Chinese individuals to other parts of the world.

It is this gap in the sociological literature that I will address, situating my thesis in Singapore. Singapore is a nation-state in South-East Asia that occupies a unique position as a place where a previous minority ethnic group of Chinese individuals in a British colony now compose their own host society (Ang 2001, Cohen 1997). Chinese individuals do not have to shape their Chineseness against a contrasting host society, but in the context of an elected government that chooses to create their own versions of Singaporean Chineseness (Chua 2003, Kong and Yeoh 2003, PuruShotam 1998). Singapore is a unique instance of migratory paths out of China that has been overlooked in favour of other minority Chinese migrant groups around the world, particularly in North America (Tuan 1998) and the United Kingdom (Song 1999).

Diaspora remains an important aspect of what it means to be a Chinese Singaporean. Chinese Singaporeans are constantly reminded of their past histories and connections with China by the state (Chua 2003), which are retained (usually loosely) through kinship or commercial means. The history of Chinese individuals in Singapore is also relatively new, spanning roughly 200 years since the time of British colonisation (Cohen 1997). This means that Chinese Singaporeans are positioned both as “diasporic individuals” as well as dominant host members of their own nation-state. On top of this, Singaporeans continue to migrate onwards to other countries (Chan 2005), disputing the idea that they might only belong to a single kind of diaspora.

If we are to understand the social lives and realities of Chinese Singaporeans in Singapore, we must first map out the social spaces of Singapore. I argue that it is not enough to discuss Singapore as a diasporic space, nor Chinese Singaporeans as part of “the Chinese Diaspora”. There are several weaknesses in current conceptions of diaspora and diasporic space that need addressing first, and Singapore’s social, historical and political circumstances further complicate what is already a problematic set of concepts. As I interrogate current concepts of diaspora, ethnicity and ethnic hybridity throughout the rest of this chapter, I will also interject with individuals’ social realities in Singapore to show how the social space of

Chinese Singaporeans needs to be reconfigured from diasporic space to *transdiasporic space*.

The Problem with Diaspora and how to fix it

Problems with diaspora are not restricted to our focus on specific social groups of diasporic individuals. The way diaspora, diasporic space and diasporic ethnicities are seen are equally problematic. Two major weaknesses concern diasporas – its use as a unifying charter of identity (Amit 2002) and its oversimplified associations with static locations and ethnicity. I will deal with each in turn. In this section I will argue that the term “diaspora” should not be utilised as a unifying charter of identity across national borders, or as a celebration of redemptive ethnic hybridity because these viewpoints simply restage the very essentialisms of race and ethnicity that sociologists are trying to escape (Amit 2002). Rather, I will argue that diaspora should be *personalised* into experiences, memories and journeys that are past, present and potential to each individual. Seen this way, one is able to better grasp the nuances of different diasporic journeys by different individuals from the same point of departure over an extended period of time. This way of understanding diasporas is especially efficacious for Chinese individuals because of the exceptionally diverse and voluminous levels of migration out of China (Cohen 1997, Poston et al 1994, Wang 1991).

Redefining Diaspora from a Single Category to a Personal Set of Journeys, Experiences and Memories

As a unifying charter of identity, diaspora takes on a macro-collectivist overview of the individuals that dwell within its categorisations and simply becomes a synonym for racial or ethnic categories. Diasporas have typically been defined as physically dispersed groups of individuals, usually across national boundaries, from an original centre (Safran 1991) that maintain real or perceived links to a homeland (Clifford 1994, Cohen 1997, Ang 1996). The term “diaspora” is a raced and ethnicised concept. Each “form” of diaspora refers to a specific racial or ethnic group, like Jewish, African, Chinese or Indian diasporas. Diaspora appears to be “tacked on to fairly conventional and localised accounts of immigrant populations” (Amit 2002:46).

Creating a single overarching category for a dispersed and often very different set of individuals means that diaspora is unable to transcend the very essentialisms that scholars like Mercer (1994) purport it to do. This is because identifications used to unify individuals often stem from primordial; essentialist views (see Chan 2005). In the instance of a “Chinese” diaspora, creating a single category of Chineseness means subscribing to a purity of race, physical characteristics and a pre-determined shared history (Ang 2001, Chan 2005). If

diaspora is a charter of identity meant to unite disparate groups of individuals scattered around the world, then

“...primordialism and essentialism are not haphazard or occasional feature so the efforts to reproduce diasporas as ideological vehicles of identity. They are fundamental to this process. To be able to assert categorical claims of shared identity across the palpable and anxious indifferences of experiences, geography history, and outlook, it comes necessary to post an essential, anterior and ‘magical’ connection.”
(Amit 2002:54)

The use of diaspora as a “category” is also problematic for Chinese individuals in Singapore. State policy since the 1980s has consistently worked to create a single homogeneous category of “Chinese¹” through the use of language policies, changes in the material environment as well as regulation in media content. Kong and Yeoh (2003) noted how in the 1980s the Singapore state chose to institute a Mandarin-only policy on all citizens it considered “Chinese”, regardless of what dialect was spoken at home. Considering individuals as part of a single Chinese diaspora only serves to amplify homogeneous categories implemented by the state.

In order to subvert these problems and essentialisms, I argue that diaspora should be recast as an *individual set of migratory journeys, experiences and memories that are past, present and potential*. These journeys and experiences are both physical *and* social. On one level they involve a form of physical displacement from one geographical location to another, often across borders of nation-states, but they also involve the social journeys of migrants as they progress or regress through economic and social hierarchies. For example, scholars have noted how newly arrived migrants into a host country find themselves placed in different economic and social circumstances than more established migrants from a similar point of departure (Cheng and Yang 1996, Tuan 1998). Their diasporic journeys do not end when they arrive in a new place, instead they continue as they live their everyday lives.

It is equally important to incorporate the longitudinal experiences of individuals (Twine 2006), and that means taking into account both their past as well as their potential future lives. By including memories, I am accounting for the links that individuals have with their diasporic histories – i.e. the journeys and experiences of their older kin. This is especially important for established, “settled” migrants like Chinese Singaporeans. Contemporary second-generation Chinese individuals in Singapore retain their connections with China indirectly via their grandparents who physically migrated to Singapore 60 years ago through family ties and kinship (Chua 2003, Freedman 1957). Although they did not directly experience physical

¹ The same policy is applied to “Malay”, “Indian” and “Other” categories, although the state recently announced the possibility of double-barrelled categories for individuals with parents of two different categories, which does little to reduce the essentialistic categorisations at work.

displacement, the memories of their kin who did migrate continue to shape their lives and the way they see themselves and others.

Finally, my version of diaspora looks to engage with the *future* physical and social journeys of individuals. This stems from the continued opportunities for movement that contemporary society, globalisation and technology afford individuals. Individuals do not move from one point to another and never move again. Instead, their physical journeys continue onwards, either within or beyond the political boundaries of their current point of settlement. Wang (1991) notes how groups of Chinese individuals have continued moving from one country to another, earning the term *hua qiao*. Amongst Chinese Singaporeans, this behaviour is already apparent – Chinese Singaporeans whose grandparents moved to Singapore from China have already migrated onwards to the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and so on².

Why Diasporic Space cannot work for Singapore and Chinese Singaporeans

In this section I will argue that diasporic space suffers from two distinct problems – One, diasporic space often suffers from an oversimplified dichotomy of “here” and “there”, a place of settlement and a “homeland” (imagined or otherwise), and as such does not account for the nuanced and personalised journeys of migrants. Two, since diasporic space is built on conceptions of diaspora as an ethnic category, it also incorporates problems of essentialism and primordialist leanings, and is often subjected to politically-defined boundaries that shape the way we understand the social lives of migrants. Finally, I will argue that the social realities of Chinese Singaporeans create *additional* and *practical* problems for diasporic space in its current form. I will propose that diasporic space is reconfigured into *transdiasporic space* – an overlapping set of personal diasporas from which diasporic individuals draw their ethnic identifications.

Diasporic space is defined in this thesis as the *social* space that diasporic individuals inhabit. This includes not just their immediate material and physical environment and the everyday places they dwell in, but the social spaces of their points of departure and future embarkation and the connections they have with these places. Diasporic space is sometimes expressed as diasporic consciousness (Anderson 2006, Appadurai 1994, Clifford 1994), a unifying sense of identity that purportedly links individuals of the “same diaspora” together in feelings of empathy through the medium of global media. Diasporic space is also closely related to transnational space, and some scholars have argued that diasporic individuals inhabit a transnational social field (Knowles 2003). However, transnationalism and transnational space

² A census of Asian-born Australians by the Australian government counts 30,000 Singaporeans living in Australia who have taken up Australian citizenship.
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.NSF/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/666a320ed7736d32ca2570ec000bf8f9!OpenDocument>

are largely concerned with the *connections* that individuals and institutions have with each other (Vertovec 2009), and encompasses a scholarship that exceeds the scope of this thesis. Transnational space is an important aspect of a diasporic individual's life, but ethnicity and diaspora remain a subset of issues – not all transnationals are diasporic, but all diasporic individuals engage in some form of transnational activity. For the purpose of this thesis diasporic space offers a more focussed view of the social spaces of diasporic individuals.

However, diasporic space in its current form suffers from three weaknesses that undermine its efficacy and cannot account for the social realities of my chosen field of study. The first is that concepts of diasporic space and diasporic consciousness are still predicated on diaspora being a unifying concept of identity that joins strangers around the world together under an umbrella of collectivism (Anderson 2006). Whilst there is some empirical evidence that shows a global mobilisation of ethnic groups, it does not necessarily follow that *all* diasporic individuals feel such a connection and *all* individuals would engage in political action for their unknown “brethren”. Instead, it remains very much up to the individual to choose to connect with others she considers part of her diaspora or whether to move further away from them.

This kind of diasporic space implies a flattened and restrictively connected social space for diasporic individuals. It does not take into account the possibility that a diasporic individual's concept of diaspora can extend *beyond* her ethnic group, or the possibility of an individual claiming membership to more than one group of diasporic individuals. This is highly apparent amongst Chinese Singaporeans who claim political citizenship in Singapore, yet espouse connections to social fields in or memories (real or imagined) of China. When Chinese Singaporeans migrate onwards to another country they are reminded of their connections *both* to Singapore *and* to China. For diasporic space to work, we need to configure a social space that accounts for the multiplicity of loyalties and possibilities open to Chinese Singaporeans.

Secondly, the purported connections that diasporic individuals have with their places of settlement / departure and which make up diasporic space are often oversimplified, especially for migratory routes scholars are unfamiliar with. This oversimplification falls prey to the political discourses of nation-states who often seek to espouse a unified veneer. In the case of this thesis, oversimplifying the social fields that make up diasporic space into “Singapore”, “China”, “the rest of the world” and so on only serves to accentuate the ethnic homogeneity of Singaporean state policy. What we need is a conceptualisation of diasporic space that interrogates the everyday layer of social lives where individuals are able to express their ethnic heterogeneity *and* undermine the political discourses of nation-states.

The obfuscation of personal social lives and ethnicities of Chinese Singaporeans by the state has been carefully analysed by other scholars, and I will only deal with it in a summary

fashion here³. Chinese Singaporeans have multiply diverse diasporic journeys, experiences and memories. Their points of departure are far more detailed than *just* China, as regional differences meant that different individuals from different regions spoke mutually unintelligible dialects (Freedman 1957). Although Chinese Singaporeans overwhelmingly pointed to regions within Southern China as their points of departure, the dialects spoken (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hokchew, Hainanese) were sufficiently different to also encompass different rituals, objects, belief systems and superstitions (Feuchtwang and Wang 2001). State policy has sought to systematically eradicate the use of dialects and replace it with Mandarin so as to create a singular category of “Chinese” in Singapore (PuruShotam 1998).

An oversimplified social field is a primary characteristic of the Singaporean state. The need to present a united front is understandable – Singapore’s geopolitical position in South-East Asia is precarious as it is the only secular Chinese-majority entity in an otherwise majority Islamic non-Chinese region. Singapore’s expenditure on defence outstrips that of other much larger nation-states like Egypt and Pakistan⁴, and its creation of a single, coherent, united country is a core part of its defence policy⁵. However, for the purposes of sociological analysis, this homogenous veneer obscures the diverse and nuanced lives of Singaporeans and especially Chinese Singaporeans and thus any refinement of diasporic space must look beneath the carefully contrived layer of politically-correct Singaporean Chineseness.

The third weakness is that diasporic space is often spoken of in abstract terms. The focus is often on an imagined consciousness and discourses that connect diasporic individuals and places over physical distances. These abstractions mean that diasporic space remains ephemeral and difficult to relate to the material realities and environments that surround diasporic individuals. More needs to be done to understand the place of the material in diasporic space because it is in the material that individuals make their discourses and identifications tangible (Knowles 2003, St Louis 2002). By existing in a material environment and making it their own, diasporic individuals are actively living out their social lives. As Ingold puts it, the material environment is the “homeland of their thoughts” (Ingold 2000:186). Therefore, any reconfiguration of diasporic space should privilege the material as a source of observations of individuals’ social lives and social realities.

Some work on diasporas and diasporic spaces have included the material – most notably Gilroy’s (1993) work on the “changing same” – an anti-antiessentialist view of diaspora. Gilroy discusses the *material* aspect of diaspora through the examination of the flows of commodities that “have *carried inside them* oppositional ideas, ideologies, theologies and philosophies” (Gilroy 1991:157). He considers all items that have brought cultural forms

³ For a full outline of the state’s role in Singapore and nation-building, see Appendix 1

⁴ http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/policy/securityspending/articles/fy09_dod_request_global/

⁵ http://www.totaldefence.sg/imindef/mindef_websites/topics/totaldefence/about_td/5_Pillars/sd.html

across in a transnational manner, from ships to phonograph records, and is especially interested in how forms of culture instruct certain kinds of thought and ideas that not only challenge the assumptions of modernity and the racialised essentialisms that come with those assumptions, but also may provide the opportunity for political action beyond the borders of the nation-state. Other scholars have also incorporated the material into diaspora, although this is often in conjunction with studies in race and ethnicity (Bales 1999, Knowles and Harper 2009, Miller 2005, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa 2000).

Reconfiguring diasporic space thus means doing three things – opening up the possibility of multiple diasporic loyalties and overlapping connections for each individual, extending oversimplified social fields beyond politically-defined discourses, and placing a greater focus on material environments and artefacts. I argue that this can be achieved through the use of *transdiasporic space*. Transdiasporic space is defined here as *collections of overlapping sets of diasporas, where each diaspora is a personal set of migratory journeys, experiences and memories*. Transdiasporic space reconfigures diasporic space by focussing on the individual and the individual's diasporic journeys. It provides a platform upon which we can understand the various social interactions and everyday lives of Chinese Singaporeans. In the next section, I will map out transdiasporic space.

Configuring Singapore as Transdiasporic Space

Transdiasporic space is made in the *encounters* and *interactions* of migratory and diasporic individuals, both during their actual diasporic and geographic movements, as well as in their quotidian lives. It also acts as a *resource* from which diasporic individuals draw their ethnic identifications, a point which I will discuss when configuring transdiasporic ethnicity in chapter 2. In this section I will outline five important characteristics of transdiasporic space that address the shortfalls of diasporic space. I will argue that transdiasporic space is a resource of ethnic identifications for the individuals who dwell in it, it is material and mundane, it is personal and personalised, it is fluid in its shape, and it is longitudinal in its outlook. As I map out these characteristics, I will also show how they apply to my chosen field of study.

The most important feature of transdiasporic space in relation to this thesis is that it acts as a *resource from which diasporic individuals draw their ethnic identifications*. This means that transdiasporic space opens up a wealth of possibilities from which ethnicity is produced, and is not just restricted to specific ethnic diasporas. We are thus not faced with a duality of “Chinese” versus “the rest of the world”, or “East” versus “West”. Instead, ethnic resources are infinitely multiplicative and complicatedly layered. They are unquantifiable in terms of their permutations, and better reflect the different places and spaces from which ethnic identifications can be drawn. A diasporic individual's ethnic identifications are not just drawn from her own experiences and journeys, but also from the experiences and journeys of those

around her and especially those she chooses to be close to. This is no more apparent than in the connections that third-generation Chinese Singaporeans have with their first-generation migrant grandparents. For these third-generation Chinese Singaporeans, their lives are complexly intertwined with the journeys that their grandparents made and are made real in the consequences of those journeys. Ethnic identifications are drawn from interactions between these individuals, such as dialect spoken (Freedman 1957), religion, regional practices and ethnic festivals celebrated. This is not a deterministic causality between grandparent, parent and child. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that the actions of one individual can and does have influences on, implications and ramifications for another individual, especially one who is socially intimate to them.

Transdiasporic space is material and mundane. It is found in the everyday lives of diasporic individuals who engage and interact with other individuals and their material environments. An individual's diaspora is remembered, recorded and perpetuated by material artefacts (Gilroy 1991). The journeys and routes that diasporic migrants take often involve a physical movement within a material environment (Safran 1991), and it is in these journeys that artefacts are created and consumed. A photograph of an old home, for example, serves as a reminder of where one used to be, and acts as a contrast to where one is now. Plane tickets, immigration documents and passports all act as biographies of diasporic memories (Knowles 2003). Transdiasporic space is also material in the way that individuals create overlaps with other individuals' personal diasporas. This can occur through the consumption of popular media like television shows, music or movies, or through other cultural products like food and music. These encounters are important because it is in the overlaps and connections where transdiasporic space is formed, and it is in the material environment where overlaps and connections are readily observable.

Diasporic journeys and memories of Chinese Singaporeans are immanently apparent in the material artefacts they import, produce, use and consume in everyday life. Not only do these artefacts expose productions of Singaporean Chineseness (which I will discuss in chapter 2) but they also expose the different routes and paths taken by diasporic individuals or by their predecessors, and how over time these routes have been shaped and altered. Temples and religious monuments built in Singapore excellent examples of these routes. In the centre of the city is Thian Hock Keng temple⁶, a Hokkien (Fujian province of China) temple dedicated to Ma Zu, the Chinese Goddess of the Sea. Thian Hock Keng temple dates back to 1839, before Chinese Singaporeans became the dominant host society and during British colonial reign. Hokkien immigrants would visit and give prayers of thanks to Ma Zu for their safe passage across the seas from China to Singapore. The temple still remains open for Chinese Singaporeans to purchase ancestral tablets (small tabletop gravestones) for their deceased family members and to place them in the temple for safekeeping. Thian Hock Keng temple

⁶ <http://www.thianhockkeng.com.sg/home.html>

remains both as a marker of the diasporic journeys of Chinese Singaporeans as well as an aesthetic marker (Knowles 2003) of Singaporean Chineseness.

Transdiasporic space is personal and personalised. It is based on an individual's diasporic journeys, experiences and memories as well as the connections that an individual is able to make with other diasporic journeys, experiences and memories. These connections do not have to be in an individual's immediate personal proximity, but can be transmitted via the production and consumption of electronic media and other goods and services. In this way transdiasporic space involves multiple *overlaps* of personal diasporas. Boundaries, if any, are defined by the individual and not the state. Transdiasporic space undermines the political discourses of nation-states who seek to bind an individual's social fields in accordance to state policy or state interpretations of ethnicity, culture, race, nationality and so on. It should be noted however that political boundaries cannot be totally discounted. It is still useful to attribute a particular practice, clothing, food, music or style as "American", "British" or "Singaporean" not only because it allows us to capture the diversity of artefacts available to individuals, but also because individuals continue to associate these labels with the cultural forms (Gilroy 1991) and aesthetic markers (Knowles 2003) they consume. What I am avoiding by using transdiasporic space are state-dictated and sometimes state-sanitised versions of diaspora, culture, race and ethnicity.

This aspect of transdiasporic space is especially important to Singapore and Chinese Singaporeans because of the role played by the Singaporean state in creating veneers of Chineseness that obscure the everyday lives of Chinese Singaporeans. As I have mentioned in this chapter, state intervention in Singapore is highly influential in many aspects of Singaporeans lives. The Singaporean state has decided that it would be advantageous for Chinese Singaporeans to have a common and collectivised ethnic identity (Kong and Yeoh 2003, PuruShotam 1998). Part of this policy involved transforming the material landscape of Chinese Singaporeans into a state-sponsored version of their diasporic journeys and Chineseness. This is no less obvious than Chinatown. As part of a way to "remember" the experiences of Chinese immigrants in colonial times, the state chose to renovate Singapore's Chinatown and introduce specific forms of industry and ethnic activities that showcased Confucian values (Kong and Yeoh 2003). The result was that some parts of Chinatown have become more akin to caricatures of Singaporean Chineseness for the enjoyment of tourists than material biographies of past diasporic journeys (Heng 2004).

Looking at Singapore as transdiasporic space allows us to look beneath these superficial veneers to interrogate the actual, lived social realities of Chinese Singaporeans and their productions of ethnicity. It allows us to see, experience and understand productions of ethnicity that would have eluded a casual observer whose first experience of Singaporean Chineseness would have been a sanitised Chinatown. At the same time, transdiasporic space

accounts for the different journeys of diasporic individuals into Singapore from China. Whilst the overwhelming majority of Chinese immigrants into Singapore 50 years ago were unskilled or semi-skilled labourers (Wang 1991), there were also teachers, doctors, merchants and other administrators. My individual-focussed approach (Evans 1993, Knowles 2003) to diaspora and transdiasporic space opens up possibilities of seeing diasporic journeys from multiple angles and points of departure so as to paint a better backdrop where productions of Singaporean Chineseness take place.

Transdiasporic space is fluid. It does not rely on static overarching definitions of ethnic diasporas that restrict an individual to any sociological account of any specific ethnic group. In other words, it takes into account an individual's potentially multiplicative loyalties to other social groups in different contexts. This is symptomatic of the opportunities for experimentation that globalisation affords – an individual can claim loyalty or seek affiliations with other individuals in other nation-states and diasporas whilst still being geographically located in her own nation-state. This feature is highly apparent in Singapore, where Chinese Singaporeans (especially youth) have been observed to engage in what appears to be ethnic promiscuity, consuming and engaging in any “culture” but their own. Of particular popularity are material artefacts from American, British, French, Japanese, Taiwanese and Hong Kong social fields (Ang 2001, Chua 2003). Transdiasporic space opens pathways to engage with these options outside of any particular ethnic social group. Instead of loyalties to a particular “Chinese” diaspora, Chinese Singaporeans can shape their transdiasporic space into whatever they choose it to be.

The fluid nature of transdiasporic space allows us to account for a rich set of ethnic identifications that diasporic space does not. Diasporic space restrictively focuses on an individual's past and membership to a specific ethnic diaspora, and does not give enough weight or attention to the implications of globalisation or the geopolitical processes that affect the way an individual views things like “heritage”, “tradition” and so on. For example, a Chinese Singaporean at one point in her life may take on a romanticised view of her “heritage” as a Chinese person whose ancestors lived in China. She may draw ethnic identifications from these romanticised and idealised notions. However, over the course of her life her experiences may change, perhaps through encounters, media consumption or otherwise. How she then views her “past” could affect the way she produces her own Chineseness. Research into auto/biography has shown how individuals create their life-histories and use these histories to shape their decisions and plans (Evans 1993, Rapport 1999). As Rapport (1999:3) notes, “individuals are responsible for seeing present moments of being in the context of past and future ones.”

Finally, *transdiasporic space is longitudinal* in that it accounts for the *potential* journeys and interactions a diasporic individual may undertake. This is not the same as predicting the

future. Rather, it is about accepting that individuals may have ambitions to continue their lives in another geographic location and that these ambitions shape their present everyday lives. Their ambitions are manifested not just in everyday discourse (“one day I hope to settle in America”) but also in the connections and overlaps an individual makes with other individual’s diasporas. This is useful to us as social researchers because it explains the *choices* that individuals make when choosing to distance themselves or to bring themselves closer to other individuals, ideas, lifestyles, consumption patterns and so on, and is especially useful when observing the different ethnic options available to them when they make their ethnicities.

For some Singaporeans the possibility of future migrations “post-Singapore” is already a reality. Singaporeans have established themselves either as temporary economic migrants (Amit 2002) or settled migrants largely in North America, Europe and Australasia (Wang 1991). This means that concepts of diaspora for Chinese Singaporeans already extend beyond “the Chinese diaspora” and into multiple instances of diasporic journeys and loyalties, multiple migratory paths leapfrogging from China to Singapore and onwards. These movements are also not spontaneous or sudden, but often involve a degree of pre-planning and applications for visas and work permits. In other words, the diasporic journeys of Singaporeans have already begun, whilst they are still in Singapore and *before* they have physically migrated to another nation-state. The longitudinal nature of transdiasporic space embraces these ambitions and looks for ways in which they shape the ethnicities of those who espouse them.

Conclusion

In this chapter I noted how diaspora and diasporic space were unsatisfactory in accounting for the lives and realities of Chinese Singaporeans. It was not possible to work within the confines of diasporic space simply because it held so many weaknesses that were accentuated by the historical, social and political processes of my chosen field of study. I argued that it is necessary to reconfigure diasporic space into *transdiasporic space*. By doing this I have created a more sophisticated and detailed understanding of diaspora that bypasses nation-state discourses and examines the individual – “the conduit and conductor of social processes” (Knowles 2003:65). Transdiasporic space is material and mundane, personal and personalised, fluid in its construction and longitudinal in its outlook. These characteristics create opportunities for a more detailed understanding of the social spaces in which diasporic individuals dwell, where I can make observations, analyse and engage with my informants’ productions of ethnicity.

Changing the way we see diaspora and diasporic space also means changing the way we see individuals existing in that space. If ethnicity is a way for individuals to exist, it means we need to interrogate the way ethnicity works in transdiasporic space. In the next chapter, I will

argue that ethnicity as a process (Hall 1992) of personal subjectivities (Knowles 2003) insufficiently accounts for a Chinese Singaporean's diasporic journeys. The solution to this is to *extend* our concepts of ethnicity to take into account the flows, paths and directions that individuals take in their everyday life.

Chapter 2: Configuring Transdiasporic Ethnicity, Ethnic Lifestyles and Ethnic Tastes

Introduction and Overview

Transdiasporic ethnicity is defined as ethnicity that is produced in transdiasporic space. In this chapter I will argue that sociological treatments of diasporic ethnicities have for too long focussed on ethnic hybridities at the expense of other ways diasporic individuals produce ethnicity, and that this focus has also been overly optimistic and celebratory. I will argue that like diaspora and diasporic space, diasporic ethnicity needs to be reconfigured into a form that better acknowledges the *migratory journeys, experiences and memories* of diasporic individuals. I will do this by extending current conceptions of ethnicity as a process of personal subjectivities into a journey of *personal social trajectories*, building upon my previous chapter's framework of configuring diaspora as a personal set of journeys and transdiasporic space as overlapping sets of personal diasporas.

Borrowing vocabulary from studies in social stratification, I will argue that *transdiasporic ethnicity is made in the social intimacies and distances between individuals and the ethnic lifestyles they espouse*. These social intimacies and distances vary according to the directions of an individual's social trajectories, and these directions are influenced by an individual's *ethnic taste – visual judgements of her own and others' aesthetic markers*. What influences ethnic taste and thus the way transdiasporic ethnicity is made remains unknown, and becomes my focus for the rest of this thesis.

The Problem with Diaspora and Ethnic Hybridity

In her critique of postmodernist treatments of diaspora, Amit (2002) notes two persistent trends. The first is an inclusion of ever more expansive definitions of the concept, and the second is the interpretation of the diasporic status in celebratory (Kotkin 1992) rather than critical terms. Ethnic hybridity has often been implicated in diasporic scholars' celebratory tones (Werbner 1998), and is defined as a mixing of different ethnic identifications between individuals to create a coherent and harmonious whole. The associations that ethnic hybridity has with diaspora stems from the idea that as diasporic individuals who travel across national boundaries they syncretise and hybridise their ethnic identifications with other ethnicities they encounter (Song 2003).

Scholars such as Gilroy (1991) and Bhabha (1994) have attempted to analyse hybridic formations of racial and ethnic identity without producing essentialist models of human

subjectivity. Solomos and Back (1996) explain Bhabha's treatment of hybridity in relation to diasporas.

“Hybrid identifications combine elements that are incommensurable but this space also constitutes an arena in which boundaries can be reconfigured and cultural authority contested. From this angle the social relations of race and identity are never fixed or pre-given, since they are the product of complex processes of cultural hybridisations and social change.” Solomos and Back 1996:144 on Bhabha

Hybridity is seen here as a way of contesting imposed definitions of identity by the state onto minority groups, or what Clifford (1994:319) calls “cultures of resistance”. It has also been advocated as a beneficial outcome of globalisation where different individuals espousing different ethnicities create a “melting-pot” of multicultural ethnicities (Bhabha 1990). In both cases, ethnic hybridity is seen as having largely beneficial outcomes for the individuals or social groups who embrace them. But three crucial problems remain when we deal with ethnic hybridity. One, ethnic hybridity does not necessarily create cultures of resistance. Hybridity can easily be subsumed under banners of multiculturalism to promote state-sponsored versions of ethnicity (Amit 2002, Kong and Yeoh 2003). Two, ethnic hybridity can and does lead to social exclusion, injustices and violence (Solomos and Back 1996). Three, studies in ethnic hybridities sometimes regard it as an almost inevitable consequence of different diasporic individuals encountering and interacting with each other. Numerous studies have shown distinct countermovements to hybridity which further questions its redemptive capabilities (Cohen 1997, Hall 1991).

The first problem comes with the idea that hybridity can lead to resistance against overbearing governments. This is not necessarily true. Ethnic hybridity is often used by nation-states as a political device in the form of multiculturalism to promote dialogue and interaction between social groups espousing different racial and ethnic identifications (Chan 2005, Chua 2003). In other instances governments of nation-states have attempted to force the issue of hybridity onto their populations for the sake of nation-building, sometimes ignoring the very voices of the individuals they seek to integrate (Mercer 1994). For example, the Singapore government's approach to multiculturalism has been to create caricatures of ethnic groups based on essentialistic ethnic identifications made real in the construction and marketing of geographic ethnic sectors in Singapore, with apt titles like Chinatown, Little India and Geylang Serai¹ (see Kong and Yeoh 2003 for an example of Chinatown).

¹ Geylang Serai is marketed as Singapore's indigenous population's (Malay) ethnic enclave - <http://www.yoursingapore.com/content/traveller/en/browse/see-and-do/culture-and-heritage/cultural-precincts/geylang.html>

The second problem comes with the idea that hybridity promotes inter-ethnic understanding and a non-confrontational environment. But ethnic hybridity has been shown to have been used to marginalise, exclude and harm other individuals. Solomos and Back's study of the Nazi Swastika exemplified such actions, where they showed how the Nazis in World War II appropriated the swastika from Buddhism, together with other cultural references from around the world to create a visual and hybrid culture of intolerance, racism and ultimately genocide (Solomos and Back 1996).

Finally, the inevitability of ethnic hybridity in globalisation is called into question. Scholars of migratory movements and globalisation have noted that instead of hybridity, there sometimes occurs a counter-movement of *glocalisation* (Cohen 1997) and the reinforcing of social and cultural prejudices (Hall, Held and McGrew 1992). Societies continue to make new essentialisms on the very ingredients that constitute hybrid identities. Bhatt (1994) calls these "reactionary ethnic formations", arguing that "contemporary forms of fundamentalism and neo-traditionalism within minority communities are the product of diversity and difference which is sometimes celebrated as liberating and progressive" (Solomos and Back 1996:145).

It is thus not entirely useful to talk about diasporas in terms of ethnic hybridity. Whilst activities of syncretism have been observed and are useful in understanding how individuals interact with each other in certain social environments (Back 1995, Modood, Beishon and Virdee 1994), ethnic hybridity continues to obscure the nuances of individual ethnicities that are created and shaped on an everyday basis. It is a blunt instrument that remains overoptimistic and over-reliant on essentialistic notions of race and ethnicity. It would be far better to shift our attention away from the *products* of syncretic activities (hybridity) and recalculate what actually happens between individuals on an everyday basis. Instances of "cultural borrowing" (Back 1995) might happen, but so could many other things. It is imperative that we refocus our attention onto the many other interactions and actions of diasporic individuals.

In order to achieve this shift, it is first necessary to frame my arguments against what we already know about ethnicity, what is happening in the everyday lives of my informants, and how it is made. The adoption of certain conceptions of ethnicity has often led to state policies around the world that create overarching layers of inaccuracy in observing productions of ethnicity, and this is no different in Singapore (PuruShotam 1998). These policies have also had sometimes undesirable ramifications for the lives of individuals. In the next section, I will discuss how Singaporean state policy appears to be predicated on assumptions of what Hall (1992) calls situational ethnicity, leading to social tensions and economic exclusion.

Ethnicity and the Singaporean State

Although ethnicity and ethnic groups are now considered to be social constructs, this has not always been the case. Early understandings of ethnicity, as evidenced in the work of early anthropologists (see Geertz 1963, Van den Berghe 1978) attributed ethnicity to an extension of race and blood ties, or a common and static heritage. These have now been disputed and criticised for their essentialist views (Barth 1969, Wallman 1978), but there is still much debate as to what ethnicity *is*.

Hall (1992:275) considered three forms of human subjects when he discussed ethnic identity – the enlightenment subject, the sociological subject and the postmodern subject. The latter two are most useful to us and what I will be focussing on. The sociological subject is based on the idea that the inner core of the individual is not independent of the cultures and symbols in his or her social environment. What is now known as the “situational” model of ethnicity operates within the sociological conception of the subject. The “situational” model states that ethnicity can be activated and “used” by individuals when it suits them (Wallman 1978), and this corresponds with the “instrumentalist” view of ethnicity. In this view, ethnicity is a tool that can be leveraged on by individuals and social groups – as Patterson (1975) showed when studying the use of kinship ties amongst Chinese immigrants in the Caribbean.

However, situational models of ethnicity and the sociological subject that they produce have several weaknesses. Markers of ethnicity are defined in a static way, not accounting for longitudinal changes. Situational models do not articulate the micro-structure of boundary systems with the macro-contexts of class and gender. Ethnicity thus becomes a reified notion that transcends considerations of class, gender and sexuality (Solomos and Back 1996). This preoccupation with associating ethnicity with *prime* expressions of identity means that the sociological subject has one option – ethnicity, or some other expression. This has been exemplified in the subcultural approach (Garrison 1979, Pryce 1979), which presented immigrant children in the United Kingdom as being “caught” between two cultures.

The rational, strategic portrayal of the sociological subject also contained dangerous assumptions about race and ethnicity. In their critique of the sociological subject, Solomos and Back note that much discussion on the issue of racial-ethnic identities “assumes that individuals should utilise their ethnic identity in a unitary, constant and strategic manner”. Arguing that the sociological subject may reinforce or legitimise this version of identity, “the result is that sociological models of ethnicity can come dangerously close to legitimising the sovereign identity enshrined within pernicious colour-coded state legislation”. (Solomos and Back 1996:131)

This is exactly the kind of legitimisation and reification that epitomises the Singaporean state's version of Chineseness, or any of the other major "ethnicities" in its categorisations. Singapore utilises a CMIO model of ethnicity, namely, Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others. An individual at birth is shunted into one of these ethnic categories, based on his or her parents' (also categorised) ethnicities. Hence, a child born to "Chinese" parents would also be "Chinese", whereas a child with say a European father and a "Chinese" mother would be classified under "Others". Individuals placed in the "Chinese" category are required to learn what the state deemed to be their "mother tongue". In the case of the "Chinese", this would be Mandarin, regardless of dialects spoken at home (Kong and Yeoh 2003).

Ethnic categories in Singapore determine a wide variety of resources that an individual has access to over the period of her life. For example, the state practices an ethnic quota known as an "ethnic integration policy" in HDB² flats (Lum and Tan 2003), the most common form of housing in Singapore. Individuals from the "Chinese" category may only buy flats from other "Chinese" individuals, and the same applies to "Malays" and "Indians". Each block of flats has a pre-allocated number of flats for "Chinese", "Malay" and "Indian" occupants, even when the flats go onto the public market. Ethnic categories also determine some (but not all) forms of social assistance – "Chinese" individuals receive support from the Chinese Development Association Council (CDAC) and "Indian" individuals receive assistance from SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Association).

Thus despite Singapore's claim to multiculturalism, it is a reified and essentialised form of multiculturalism (Amit 2002), and one that is sociologically unsatisfactory and potentially problematic in the light of increased immigration to Singapore. The state continues to encourage immigration to compensate for falling birth rates, with many of these immigrants coming from China and India. This has resulted in public resentment of "newcomers" and "foreigners" to Singapore, similar to what has been observed with second generation Asian immigrants and their relationships with localised immigrants in the United States (Tuan 1998). The problem lies in the state's attempts at categorising all individuals into oversimplified groups based on the CMIO model. Thus, newly arrived Chinese immigrants (those who take up Singaporean citizenship) are "assimilated" into the "Chinese" category with little regard for the nuances of ethnicity. The result that one observes in everyday life is increasing resentment and exclusionary practices by established Singaporeans, evidenced in both mainstream (newspaper) media as well as opposition political grassroots groups³.

² HDB – Housing Development Board – a governmental organisation charged with building, selling and distributing state-subsidised public housing which can be resold on the private market under certain conditions

³ <http://www.temasekreview.com>

Is Ethnicity as a Process of Personal Subjectivities Good Enough?

The state has recognised such public resentment, and has set up a variety of government bodies, councils and think-tanks to strategise the “integration” of these new immigrants into Singaporean society⁴. But this cannot happen without a decisive change in the concept of ethnicity that underscores the CMIO model. More recent conceptualisations of ethnicity have started on this, and can be found in work by Hall (1992) and Knowles (2003). These studies provide a useful basic framework for my treatment of ethnicity. In this section, I will show how ethnicity works as a process of personal subjectivities, drawing attention to several things. One, its ever-changing nature, two, the need to focus on actions in everyday life, and three, the focus on the individual over the structural. However, I will also argue that this approach has several weaknesses when dealing with diasporic individuals, and for the purpose of this study our understanding of ethnicity needs to develop these concepts to better account for the movements and journeys of diasporic individuals.

Hall’s postmodern subject is premised on the idea that “human identity does not possess a fixed, permanent or essential quality”. (Hall 1992:132) The postmodern subject, as Solomos and Back (1996) note, was produced as part of the wider predicament of contemporary societies in late modernity. Rejecting a notion of unified identities, Hall suggests a model of the human subject that allows for any number of identities at the same time, or at different times, which are also informed by social and political contexts. As Hall argues

“The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with at least temporarily” Hall 1992:277

This multiplicity of possible identities implies that Blackness, Whiteness, even Chineseness do not exist as separate and bounded entities. Instead, they “are forms of personhood to be performed on the colonial stage” (Solomos and Back 1996:138). Identity should thus be seen as a process of identification and it follows that ethnic identity should be seen as a process of ethnic identification. Chineseness should not be defined as a category in the way the Singapore state has done. Instead, it must be seen in conjunction with other forms of ethnic affiliations and identifications, especially those that individuals engage with on a regular basis, like that of “Western” or other Chinese cultural forms from Taiwan or Hong Kong (Chua 2003).

⁴ The National Population Secretariat lists under their mission statement – “facilitating the naturalisation of suitable foreigners and their integration with Singapore society.”
<http://www.nps.gov.sg>

Whilst it is useful to see ethnicity as a process, Hall's approach does not address the *mechanics* of that process deeply enough. How are we to understand how an individual engages in "splitting"? What are the conceptual tools that we can use to analyse these ambivalences? The answer lies in Knowles's (2003) treatment of race and ethnicity, in what she calls the "subjectivities" of the individual. Subjectivity, as defined by Knowles and used in this thesis,

"..is about the underlying principles of what it means to be person in the world.

Subjectivity, as Wander so lucidly shows, is always social and the subject is created and recreated through forms of praxis (Crossley 1994:46) composed of routine activities." Knowles 2003:32-32

Knowles draws from three mutually incompatible models of subjectivity (capacities, subject positions and relational aspects) to create a set of tools for socially analysing issues of race and ethnicity. Knowles's argument highlights three important aspects of personhood. The first is that an individual's subjectivities are made up of the everyday social relationships that he or she has with other individuals. The second is that these subjectivities are also composed of an individual's interactions with the non-human space around him or her and the third is that the subjectivities of an individual are constantly in flux and never finished. The individual is constantly being made and remade (Knowles 2003:37)

This model of subjectivities enriches, illuminates and complements ethnicity as a "process of identification" (Hall 1992:48). There is a shared emphasis on a continuous, dynamic flow of "making", which is important because this removes any static notions of race, and debunks the Singaporean state's attempts at creating categories for its numerically significant ethnic populations. It is also important to note that this "making" is not limited to an individual's mind or some kind of "inner self", but through interactions performed both socially and spatially. This underscores the need to situate the individual in an interactive space so as to better understand his or her racial and ethnic identifications. In other words, we need to observe people in action, in their everyday spaces and places, if we are fully appreciate the workings, mechanisms and processes of race and ethnicity.

Finally, Knowles' focus on the *micro* aspects of race and ethnicity allows us to undermine macro-political discourses. The problem, as Knowles argues, is that many studies privilege systems, structures and collectives over the individuals that compose them. "(The) contributions of people in the making, organisation and routine maintenance of racialised regimes is systematically occluded by the conceptualisation of race as primarily a big picture problem" (Knowles 2003:27). Whilst these structural studies have their place in the literature of Sociology, their prominence leaves a gap that needs to be filled. In studying the subjectivities of an individual, and not any perceived collectives that the individual belongs to,

we are not constrained by any pre-conceived categories and are free to see the *actual* lived social realities of our informants.

Making Transdiasporic Ethnicity

Ethnicity as a process of personal subjectivities creates a solid theoretical base that emphasises *change*, *individuality* and *interaction*. But it remains lacking when one considers the *movements* and *directions* of diasporic individuals. In this section I will argue that ethnicity can be extended to better account for the pathways and journeys of diasporic individuals by taking two steps. The first is an acknowledgement that my treatment of ethnicity may or may not be applicable to individuals who have not experienced diasporic journeys, but that this applicability is not within the scope of this thesis. My concern is with diasporic individuals, specifically Chinese Singaporeans, and attempts at a “grand theory” of ethnicity would serve more to hamper my observations than to help them. To this extent, I am labelling my treatment of ethnicity made by diasporic individuals as *transdiasporic ethnicity* – which is defined as ethnicity produced in transdiasporic space. For the sake of convenience, when I refer to ethnicity from here onwards in this thesis I mean *transdiasporic ethnicity*, unless I make a clear distinction.

The second step is an active engagement with the material and social circumstances of diasporic individuals. How do we bring a sense of movement and direction into ethnicity? How do we capture feelings of constant change? Hall’s (1992) treatment of ethnicity as a *process* involves movement but not direction. Seeing ethnicity purely as a process ignores the migratory routes and journeys that diasporic individuals take and the trails that they leave. The metaphor of a process also does not pay enough attention to the idea of “growth”, where a diasporic individual, although constantly producing her ethnicity, can sometimes build upon her previous experiences (see Gilroy 1991 on the “changing same”). This does not produce a coherent whole, but rather creates a semblance of continuity between previous and present experiences and interactions. It is this sense of continuity that ethnicity as a process lacks.

Knowles’s (2003) understanding of race and ethnicity in terms of personal subjectivities exposes the ambivalence of human interaction, but does not engage with what I term “an illusion of permanence” – something that is readily observable in the way individuals express their changing racial and ethnic identifications in static terms. For example, scholars have noted how Chinese individuals continue to perpetuate biological and essentialistic notions of race about themselves – skin colour, purity of blood, the slant of the eyes – as specific, permanent features of their social group (Chan 2005). And yet at the same time we see these markers of identity change but are then re-declared as permanent (Ang 2001). This illusion can also be expressed in feelings of settlement – migratory individuals who move and find a new place to call home, but can never say for certain if they will ever move again. We need a

way of looking at ethnicity that combines the uncertainty of life with the presupposed certainty of those who live it.

The answer lies in seeing transdiasporic ethnicity as a *journey of personal social trajectories*. Ethnicity as a journey opens new windows into the way diasporic individuals produce their ethnicity. Although “process” and “journey” share many characteristics like movement and change, the metaphor of a journey better accounts for the social lives of diasporic individuals. As a journey, ethnicity becomes an activity of pathfinding, discovery, ambitions, goals and even a sense of lost-ness and uncertainty. It encapsulates the migratory experiences of varying levels of hardship, privilege, adventure and misadventure. It acknowledges that individuals draw from their past memories, present experiences and future plans to create their ethnicity. In the metaphor of a process, this encapsulation of past, present and future may be optional, but in the metaphor of a journey it becomes mandatory and meaningful.

Personal social trajectories capture the directed and steered social movements of individuals without privileging notions of static social hierarchies. *Social trajectories are defined here as the actual and/or potential route of social affiliations that individuals take towards or away from other individuals, ideas, lifestyles, mindsets, beliefs, practices and so on.* In other words, it is the path of the direction in which an individual is socially steering herself towards or away from other individuals and/or their lifestyles. Social trajectories are neither permanent nor enduring, they are constantly changing according to the decisions and actions made by the individual.

As a result of these constant changes in directions, social intimacies and distances are created between different individuals, ideas, lifestyles, mindsets, beliefs and practices⁵. These intimacies and distances are not just a measure of an individual’s position in transdiasporic space, but are also an indication of who and what an individual chooses to associate with, or is coerced into associating with. In this way social intimacies and distances are dynamic mappings of personal subjectivities, but also take into account the interactions that occur between individuals’ subjectivities. In other words, it is about how different principles of living connect, clash or contrast with or against each other.

I argue that transdiasporic ethnicity is made in the social intimacies and distances between individuals and/or the *ethnic lifestyles* they espouse. *Ethnic lifestyles are defined as sets of ethnic identifications drawn from transdiasporic space and constructed and arranged by*

⁵ Social stratification scholars who draw upon social interaction distance approaches (Prandy and Bottero 2002) use social distances and intimacies to determine a particular society’s social structure and stratified hierarchies. Differential association (Prandy 1999) is the system by which individuals of a particular social position are more likely to interact of individuals of the same social location. By examining the social interactions of individuals, scholars like Prandy and Bottero argue that it is possible to define hierarchies.

individuals. Individuals make their ethnicity by gravitating towards or away from other individuals or ethnic lifestyles they like or dislike. There is no singular gravitation or affiliation an individual might make – an individual can have multiple social trajectories and multiple affiliations or distancings. What is important here is that there is a constant sense of movement towards or away from individuals or ethnic lifestyles (see next section).

The question remains as to how the *directions* of social trajectories are influenced and steered. In other words, the *character and shape* of transdiasporic ethnicity in my study have yet to be understood. I argue that the directions of social trajectories, or the individuals or ethnic lifestyles an individual likes or dislikes is regulated by “ethnic taste”. *Ethnic taste is defined as the visual aesthetic judgements of the use of one’s own or others’ aesthetic markers*. By interrogating individuals’ ethnic tastes, I argue that it will be possible to form a picture of Chinese Singaporeans’ transdiasporic ethnicities. In the following sections I will map out in more detail this theoretical framework of social intimacies and distances, ethnic lifestyles, ethnic taste and aesthetic markers. I will first define what I mean exactly by the term “ethnic lifestyle”.

Ethnic Lifestyles

The term “lifestyle” is borrowed and adapted from Bourdieu’s approach to hierarchies, class and taste. Bourdieu defines lifestyle as “a system of classified and classifying practices” (Bourdieu 1984:171). He was mainly concerned with the way individuals created consumption practices that exposed their position in the social and economic hierarchy, and how consuming different material artefacts set themselves apart from other individuals in other parts of the economic and social hierarchy. Lifestyles to Bourdieu was a useful way of categorising groups of practices that could be assigned to specific tiers of a hierarchy – in his case this was divided into three tiers of upper, middle and working class groups (Bourdieu 1984). For Bourdieu, lifestyles remained static in their definition and categorisation, and has thus been criticised by some scholars in relation to artefacts that are consumed by individuals across tiers of hierarchy, like mass-market items or popular culture (see Bottero 2005). Bourdieu’s approach to classifying practices under lifestyles was also often seen as circular and ambiguous, as Jenkins points out

“The reader is left uncertain about the social meaning of the bundles of practices and attributes identified as ‘lifestyles’, and the relationship they have with each other. The questions of the relationship between class and lifestyle also remain unresolved. Is it ‘real’ or an artefact of the analysis?” Jenkins 1992:148

For Bourdieu, creating categories of lifestyles meant using an individual’s occupation and employment status to define class fraction. Bourdieu drew upon an individual’s father’s

occupation, education, income and age to determine which class an individual belonged to, and then classified their practices under their respective upper, middle or working class “lifestyles”. This creates a circular argument because of the linkages that occupation, education and income have with an individual’s position in society, especially economic hierarchies. Some scholars have attempted to redefine lifestyles using different methods, for example social interaction (Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn 1980) or self-identification (Douglas 1982). My approach to lifestyles is not an attempt to correct Bourdieu or his work on class distinctions, but to use his concept of lifestyles to encompass the various ethnic identifications individuals build to perform their ethnicity. I term these specific forms of lifestyles “ethnic lifestyles”.

Ethnic lifestyles are constantly in flux and do not constitute a static category. They are not determined by the level of economic, social or cultural capital an individual possesses (Bourdieu 1984), and are not an indicator of an individual’s position in a hierarchy. Rather, ethnic lifestyles are a way for us to bring together the diverse options that diasporic individuals have when making their ethnicity. Ethnic lifestyles have two important characteristics – they are made tangible in the production and consumption of aesthetic markers, and they are not necessarily attached to any specific diasporic individual. In other words, they can exist as ideals that an individual aspires towards. I will deal with each in turn.

Aesthetic markers are material artefacts that individuals use to perform their racial or ethnic identities (Knowles 2003). Various scholars have made use of the concept of aesthetic markers to show how material environments, especially urban landscapes are shaped and changed by different social groups who occupy them over a period of time (Farrar 1997, Soja 1989) such that they take on a look of “ethnic occupation” (Knowles 2003:88). For example, Farrar notes how Chapeltown, a district in the town of Leeds in the United Kingdom, took on a “black” identity in the 1950s over its previous Jewish occupation (Farrar 1997:114). The result was an association of blackness to crime, and an increased police presence in a “black territory”. But it is useful to remember that aesthetic markers are not just encoded into the architecture, but are inscribed onto the body as well. What individuals choose (or are made to) wear, eat, sing, drink, or consume in any other way serves as an outward sign, an assessment signal of their ethnicity (Knowles 2003). It is this broad-based definition of aesthetic markers that I have adopted for use in this thesis⁶.

Ethnic lifestyles do not remain exclusive to any specific individual, neither are they necessarily an inherent part of an individual’s identity. *Ethnic lifestyles can be packaged into popular imagery and popular culture, existing as a set of ideals that individuals aspire to and consume*. Take for example commercialised wedding rituals. Commercialised “Western” wedding rituals have been shown to embody a specific set of ethnic identifications, packaged

⁶ I will deal with aesthetic markers more in the next two sections when I discuss Ethnic Taste

into material consumables (white wedding gown, wedding cake, wedding jewellery) that wedding professionals try to convince their clients to consume (Grimes 2002, Mead 2007, Otnes and Pleck 2003). These are drawn from transdiasporic sources around the world (see for example, Winge and Eicher's (2003) tracing of the white wedding gown from Victorian England to contemporary American society) and retransmitted to other individuals via popular media like movies, television and magazines. Mead (2007) for example, considered the effect that Disney movies like Cinderella had on the consumption choices of brides in the United States, and argued that these media forms served to reinforce the need for lavish, princess-like wedding rituals.

Ethnic lifestyles can also be created by an individual as something that the individual is attracted to or is repulsed by, but does not necessarily use to espouse her ethnicity. These ethnic lifestyles exist as independent, individualised scripts of behaviour (Appiah and Gutmann 1996), created by an individual as a way of caricaturing the way other individuals perform their ethnicity. In this way an individual may aspire to or avoid certain ethnic lifestyles. These ethnic lifestyles remain material in the way that an individual can choose a set of aesthetic markers to indicate the lifestyle she has created, but do not necessarily belong to her. An individual does not *have* to follow the script, but acknowledges that there are certain ways of life that she likes or dislikes. Racial and ethnic stereotyping is an excellent example of contrived ethnic lifestyles. An individual may choose to disassociate herself with "Chinese" or "White" people because she has assigned a certain set of aesthetic markers (choice of music, accent, clothing, food, etc) she dislikes to these individuals. These preferences are expressed as forms of "ethnic taste".

Ethnic Taste

Ethnic taste is defined as *visual aesthetic judgements made by an individual about her and others' choices of aesthetic markers*, or in other words, *ethnic lifestyles*. Ethnic tastes act to regulate and steer the directions of an individual's social trajectory, thereby also directing which individuals or ethnic lifestyles a particular individual is socially intimate with or distant to. Like "life-style", the idea of "taste" is also borrowed from studies in social stratification (Bourdieu 1984, Bottero 2005), but its use and definition differ significantly. Taste according to Bourdieu is a function of an individual's *habitus* – a structured and structuring structure (Bourdieu 1972) that is internalised in each individual and acts as the determining force of an individual's actions and practices. Taste mediates the communication between classes of products and classes of consumers (Jenkins 1992), meaning that individuals who espouse a certain taste in certain products / lifestyles are exposing their class membership and differentiating themselves from other individuals from other classes. For example, to indulge in and demand high culture, operas or fine wine would indicate an individual belongs to the

upper-class (Bottero 2005), and an individual who is actively distinguishing herself as belonging to the upper-class.

Bourdieu's concept of taste (and habitus) has drawn criticisms of determinism, elitism and charges of an oversimplified mapping of social and cultural activities onto class and hierarchies (Bottero 2005, Jenkins 1992). His restrictive use of only two forms of capital (economic and cultural) in the case of taste and lifestyles whilst at the same time working towards a theory of universal applicability creates weaknesses in his argument that prevent a wholesale adoption of his concepts of taste. However, what is useful in Bourdieu's approach is the *idea* that individuals *prefer* one thing over another, and are willing to spend capital (economic, cultural, social etc) to acquire it. Conversely, taste also implies an individual can express *dislike* for one thing over another, and hence not acquire or reject that thing. Finally, Bourdieu's use of taste is useful in that it shows how individuals may consume certain things as a means of distinguishing themselves from others. Even without associating specific things to specific hierarchical tiers, taste becomes an act of differentiation, and by seeing it in this way we can see how taste has synergies with Halls' treatment of ethnicity (Hall 1992).

My approach to taste removes Bourdieu's connections between taste and class, but retains a relationship between espousing a certain version of "taste" and creating distinctions or similarities between oneself and others. Ethnic taste becomes shorthand for understanding the directions and vectors of personal social trajectories and how individuals create intimacies or distances with other individuals or ethnic lifestyles. However, the act of judging one's use of aesthetic markers creates difficulties in observation. How are we to know when ethnic taste is being expressed? When a judgement is being made? Where in everyday life do we find acts of ethnic taste?

My treatment of ethnic taste is *visual* and *mundane*— acts of taste (making judgements) occur all the time in everyday life. This use and assessment of aesthetic markers is primarily done through *visual*, as opposed to aural, olfactive, tactile or gustative means, although these four other senses also play a supporting part. This aspect is important because it implies that acts of ethnic taste do not require the immediate physical proximity of individuals to touch, taste or smell. Instead, it is about watching, seeing and judging based on what one has seen. Judging the use of an aesthetic marker or using an aesthetic marker can thus be performed over long distances (television programmes of urban ghettos or minority privilege (see Knowles 2003)), and does not require real-time interaction (the *look* of ethnic occupation (Soja 1997) for example only requires the presence of markers in the form of buildings and architecture, not the individuals who dwell in the buildings or who built them). Acts of ethnic taste thus take place all the time in individuals' everyday lives. It happens when we meet others, when we commute, when we shop. As long as we see and assess, we are somehow engaging in acts of ethnic taste.

Understanding Aesthetic Markers in Ethnic Taste

Like ethnic lifestyles, the production and consumption of aesthetic markers are especially important to my approach to ethnic taste. It is in the material world where the visibility of ethnic taste is made real and observable. But for us to fully engage with aesthetic markers, it is necessary to take a “material approach”. This involves two layers of understanding – the first is the study of how aesthetic markers *work* with human actors in their everyday lives (Pinney 2003, Knowles 2003). The second, as I pointed out in my previous section on ethnic lifestyles, involves the material environments (building, landscapes) in which individuals *dwell* (Ingold 2000).

Knowles notes that “the *things* of everyday life are a part of who we are and how we operate in the world at large” (Knowles 2003:9). I argue that this idea can be extended by drawing upon the basic notions embodied in Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Callon 1986, Latour 2005). Broadly speaking, proponents of ANT argue that artefacts are non-human *actants*, in that they have their own agency and interact with human actors to determine outcomes in social interactions. As Pinney (2003:128) notes, it “is not that ‘we’ entangle objects but that objects entangle us”. Expressed in this fashion, we need to focus on the “material processes at work (in order) to facilitate a view from one realm to another” (Buchli 2002:16) meaning a focus on the way artefacts *work* rather than on the artefacts themselves.

This is not a reification of the inanimate object, nor does it ascribe artefacts any kind of deterministic quality. Rather, it should be seen as a *personification* of the artefact. Just like individuals, artefacts should be viewed as constantly changing in their “identity” over a period of time, and not as static or fixed props that are leveraged upon at the leisure of individuals. The social constitution of an artefact is *made* in its interactions with humans and with other artefacts. This can be illustrated with a pertinent example from weddings – the white wedding gown. Clothes, like humans, have agency, being “a part of what constitutes and forms lives, cosmologies, reasons, causes and effects” (Miller 2005:2). During the course of a Singaporean Chinese wedding, the gown changes in both form and identity. It starts out in the morning as an item of conspicuous consumption, hung openly in the room where the bride has her make-up done. Photographers and other participants “deify” the gown by taking pictures of it and cooing over its design. (“Your gown is so beautiful”) When worn by the bride, the gown also becomes an identifier, marking her out as a principal actor in the wedding. During the wedding banquet, the gown also becomes an elegant evening gown minus the veil – granting the bride additional social capital or esteem amongst her guests.

My point here is that practices of individuals are deeply and complexly intertwined with the artefacts that they interact with. Throughout the thesis, I will argue that productions of

Chineseness can be *found* in the use of artefacts. In short, artefacts have agency, they change in their “identity” over time just as humans do, and our focus should be on the way they interact with humans.

The second layer of understanding involves the material environment that individuals dwell in as part of their everyday lives. This understanding is based on what Ingold (2000) calls the “dwelling perspective”. Drawing upon Heidegger’s (1971:146) remark that “to build is in itself already to dwell”, Ingold argues that the built environment that people construct, whether physically or mentally,

“...arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings. Building, then, cannot be understood as a simple process of transcription, of a pre-existing design to the final product onto a raw material substrate ... (Design) is in itself an activity carried on by real people in a real-world environment, rather than by a disembodied intellect moving in a subjective space in which are represented the problems it seeks to solve... (P)eople do not import their ideas, plans or mental representations into the world, since that very world...is the homeland of their thoughts. Only because they already dwell therein can they think the thoughts they do.” Ingold 2000:186

What is useful in Ingold’s perspective is the idea that the human being is interwoven, affected by and affects his or her environment, and that any change made to the built environment is a result of *being* in that environment. It not only explains variations in behaviour of individuals from different social groups in responding to an identical situation, but it also undermines the dichotomy between form and process. What I mean by this is that *anything* designed by humans cannot be abstracted from the environment that the individual dwells in on an everyday basis.

In Ingold’s work we also find a resonance with the “dynamic identity” of artefacts being *personified*. In discussing a house (or building), Ingold (2000:187-188) writes that houses “have life-histories, which consist in the unfolding of their relations with both human and non-human components of their environments...Building, then, is a process that is continually going on, for as long as people dwell in an environment. It does not begin here, with a pre-formed plan, and end there, with a finished artefact.” In ethnic terms, the material environment is continuously shaped by individuals who inscribe their aesthetic markers onto the landscape that perform and assert their ethnic lifestyles (Soja 1997). If we are to understand the actions of individuals and hence productions of ethnicity, it has to be in the context of the material environment, the buildings, the landscapes in which they are doing so. In other words, we cannot divorce the individual’s physical location from her imagination.

Conclusion

Transdiasporic ethnicity, social trajectories (including distance and intimacy), ethnic lifestyles and ethnic tastes are the major framing points for the rest of this thesis. Transdiasporic ethnicity is a journey of personal social trajectories that is made in the social intimacies and distances between individuals, and the ethnic lifestyles they espouse captures the paths and trails they make in their everyday lives. Transdiasporic ethnicity improves upon current conceptions of ethnicity by accounting for the *directions* that individuals take *within* transdiasporic space. In order to understand these directions and social trajectories in the lives of my informants, I have drawn upon work by Bottero (2005) and Bourdieu (1984) and created concepts of *ethnic lifestyles* – sets of aesthetic markers, and *ethnic tastes* – preferences for certain ethnic lifestyles. Ethnic lifestyles and aesthetic markers make transdiasporic ethnicity, social intimacies and social distances tangible and observable to the researcher.

However, the different ways in which social intimacies and distances are utilised in the making of transdiasporic ethnicity remain hidden. These mechanisms shape ethnic tastes, influencing an individual to prefer one ethnic lifestyle over another. Several questions are raised in relation to these mechanisms. How do individuals express their ethnic lifestyles to others so that a choice might be made? How do individuals decide which kinds of ethnic lifestyles they prefer? What are the socially prominent ethnic lifestyles amongst Chinese Singaporeans? What are the socio-economic consequences when individuals create social distances and intimacies? These are the questions I will answer in chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10.

In order to answer these questions, it was first necessary to situate myself in the lives and realities of Chinese Singaporeans. In other words, I needed to place myself within my informants' transdiasporic spaces. In the next chapter, I will argue that the best way to access transdiasporic space and the everyday lives of individuals was to focus on concentrated bursts of activity that encapsulate the lived experiences and social realities of my informants.

Chapter 3: Weddings as Sites of Ethnicity-Making

Introduction and Overview

In this chapter I will argue for the efficacy of weddings as sites for understanding ethnicity-making amongst Chinese Singaporeans. This efficacy stems from a wedding's ability to mimic *and* extend the diasporic journeys and everyday lives of my informants. This is achieved through three distinct characteristics. One, weddings are crossroads whereby different and disparate personal diasporas collide and intersect, creating brief but vivid transdiasporic spaces whereby participants are confronted with ethnic lifestyles different from their own. Two, weddings are multiply instanced, interpolated extensions of individuals' everyday lives. They are a bricolage of expected and unexpected events in life, containing both the scripted and unscripted. Weddings are both predictable and spontaneous, creating an environment where the certain and uncertain are always in the balance. This balance allows for a rich simulacrum of everyday living, echoing the mapped routes and sudden detours our diasporic journeys take. Three, weddings are a stage for performative and intersecting material practices— they encompass intersections of conspicuous consumption, commercial activity and ritualistic performances. They are highly material-centric, placing a great emphasis on the importance of various aesthetic markers that are almost mandatory for a successful performance.

Defining the Wedding

The study of weddings has had a long and varied history, and has been the basis for many different topics and disciplines, from anthropology to marketing research to issues of gender power and the law (Charsley 1987, Engel 1984, James 1977, Otnes and Lowrey 1993, Sniezek 2005). Definitions of weddings have tended to focus largely on the execution of rites that binds two individuals into a new social unit. Van Gennep (1960) famously termed weddings as *rites of passage* – implying the importance of action and *doing* in a wedding. But weddings are much more than just what happens on the wedding day, and restricting our focus to just rituals alone ignores the many social processes at work that compose the wedding.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will define a Singaporean Chinese wedding as a series of events, rituals and practices that occur on the day of the wedding *as well as* events that lead up to and contribute to the actual wedding day. These include betrothal ceremonies, pre-wedding engagement photoshoots, discussions with wedding planners and wedding professionals and acts of purchasing wedding artefacts. Other scholars have included similar activities under the umbrella of “wedding” as part of their own studies (Corrado 2002, Mead

2007, Otnes and Lowrey 1993, Otnes and Pleck 2003) as a way to understand how and why certain wedding rites are carried out. However, contemporary studies of wedding have tended to focus on the consumption patterns of individuals as a way of understanding marketing methods and cultural practices. Issues of diaspora and ethnicity have rarely been brought up in, with a few exceptions (Bhachu 1996). I argue that weddings are particularly effective at revealing ethnicity-making mechanisms amongst diasporic individuals. This effectiveness is very much due to the scope of a wedding, the individuals that compose a wedding, and the activities in a wedding. I will first explore its *scope*.

Weddings are Crossroads of Personal Diasporas

The wedding is an opportunity for relatives, friends and business associates of both families of the bridal couple to participate in a social event. In Singaporean Chinese weddings it is not uncommon to see wedding banquets hosting anywhere from 400 to 1500 individuals at one sitting. Extended relatives, even those from neighbouring countries, will also tend to make an effort to show up, as I will demonstrate in chapter 8. Along with these individuals is a force of wedding professionals to support the execution of a wedding, including photographers, videographers, wedding car drivers, wedding planners, banquet managers, waiters and so on. Each individual, whether friend, family or professional, brings with them different diasporic journeys, ethnic lifestyles and ethnic tastes. Because the wedding is performative and requires participation and interaction, these journeys, lifestyles and tastes intersect, collide and confront. *There is a brief but intense mixing of personal diasporas, creating new and vivid transdiasporic spaces.*

Individual diasporas in weddings intersect and collide via three significant forms of social relationships. The first and most obvious is kinship and family. In Singapore the parents of the both the bride and groom are often heavily involved in the planning of the wedding. The planning stage usually involves the following negotiations - What kind of rituals will be performed, where the wedding will be held, how many tables the wedding banquet will host, how much is going to be spent, what aesthetic decorations should be used and what kind of dresses the bride should wear. Negotiations before the wedding can also involve extended relatives, especially peers of the bridal couple's parents. Such negotiations are important because they help to shape the overall "look" of the wedding, or in other words, its aesthetic style. During these negotiations different ethnic tastes and personal diasporas come into contact with each other and different sets of aesthetic markers (ethnic lifestyles) are considered.

An interview I conducted as part of my research revealed this aspect of diaspora mixing. Millie 26, a teacher, married Boon Leng, 29, a civil servant, in 2006. Millie revealed to me that two weeks before the interview her mother began receiving phone calls from relatives concerned

about whether specific rituals were being performed and whether specific artefacts had been purchased for the wedding. In particular, her relatives insisted that a roast pig (or *siu de* in Hokkien) should be bought by Boon Leng and presented to her family. Millie's tone was livid, "I told my mother no way in hell was I going to have a pig at my wedding. They smell up the place and no one is going to eat it anyway. It's a waste of money." Millie in this instance was presented with a different set of aesthetic markers from her own by her family, a different ethnic lifestyle. Her choice was to reject it, thereby setting the aesthetic tone for the rest of the wedding. But in those moments of negotiation, a new transdiasporic space was constructed between Millie's diasporic journeys and her relatives' diasporic journeys.

The second form of social relationship is an individual's social and friendship networks, not including kin. These are often the bridal couple's friends and peers. In a wedding the bridal couple usually employ a small group of friends to assist with rituals and logistics. They are often referred to as "brothers" for groomsmen and "sisters" for bridesmaids, alluding to practices in China where a bride/groom would employ actual family members to help at a wedding (Wanyan 2008). Other individuals in this group of relationships are friends or acquaintances who do not directly participate in the wedding, but provide information and advice on how to plan for and execute a wedding. Friends and peers who participate directly in the wedding bring their personal diasporic journeys into close contact with other participants - this is accentuated since groups of groomsmen and bridesmaids rarely know each other before the wedding - they are drawn from the respective personal networks of the bride and groom. Individuals who help plan for the wedding transpose their diasporic journeys in the form of advice and checklists, similar to how relatives would call on the phone and "advise" a bride/groom's mother on what to buy for the wedding.

Intersections of ethnic lifestyles and diasporic journeys between peers during the wedding is most obvious during what is known as "door games" or "gatecrashing", where the groom and his groomsmen must answer quiz questions and perform physical forfeits before they are allowed entry into the bride's home to fetch her to the groom's home. Fraser, 28, a legal counsel and Ming Ming, 26, a secretary, were married in 2005. Each drew their friends from their own personal networks. Both groups of friends comported themselves very differently. Fraser's friends were largely English-speaking and middle-income individuals, whilst Ming Ming's friends were mostly Mandarin-speaking and lower-middle income individuals, regularly lapsing into colloquial "Singlish" - a mix of English, Mandarin, Malay and Chinese dialects. During the door games the banter and bargaining exposed the different diasporic life-paths of groomsmen and bridesmaids. In everyday life such encounters would be brief and shallow. In the wedding they are public, extended and observable. The interactions between the two parties became a collision of journeys, again generating new ethnic resources for participants to consider and judge.

The third form of relationships is commercial and professional. This involves wedding professionals who are usually hired by the bridal couple (rather than their parents) to perform services “necessary” for the “successful” execution of the wedding. (I have deliberately used quotation marks because what is necessary and successful are partly influenced by profit motivations (Mead 2007).) The most commonly observed professionals are photographers, videographers, wedding car drivers, banquet managers and wedding planners. Each of these professionals brings with them their own diasporic journeys, and sometimes a commercialised version of a diasporic journey. The former is similar to that of a peer participating in a wedding or giving advice, but the latter warrants more attention. Commercialised versions of ethnicity and diaspora deeply texture and inform contemporary Singaporean Chinese weddings. Wedding professionals are considered “subject matter experts” in weddings because individuals assume that they have attended the most weddings.

A wedding professional is often able to impress her own way of doing things onto the wedding, especially when other individuals are uncertain of what to do. In this way a wedding professional indirectly brings her own experiences (journey) in direct contact with the journeys of other participants, especially the bride and groom. An example of this is how a wedding photographer or videographer might create “scripts” for a bride to follow. I photographed Colleen, 29, a manager and William’s (30, also a manager) wedding in 2008. I worked alongside a professional videographer, Gan, whose practice was to instruct the bridal couple in very detailed ways in order to capture scenes for the wedding video. When William cleared the “door games” and entered Colleen’s bedroom, Gan proceeded to take charge and direct the remainder of the ritual, telling William where to stand, what to do, and when to do it again, “just in case”. Gan constructed the details of the ritual in ways he had learnt from his previous experiences as a wedding videographer. In this way his life-path has come into contact with Colleen and William’s.

In all these collisions, interactions and intersections, new transdiasporic spaces are forged and revealed to individuals present, albeit temporarily. As the wedding ends and individuals depart, so do these spaces fade and wane. During the time that they exist they not only become a potential source of new ethnic identifications, but also present a series of ethnic lifestyles that expose themselves to judgement. In chapter 7 and 8 I will discuss how individuals “move” within these spaces, espousing their ethnic lifestyles through taste performances and how other individuals might react to these performances.

Weddings are Simulacrums and Extensions of Everyday Life

Weddings are multiply instanced, interpolated extensions of individuals' everyday lives. In the same way that personal diasporic journeys collide and intersect, so do the everyday lives of wedding participants. Two aspects are important here. One, different everyday lives come together and become entangled, in doing so they *extend* everyday life beyond (but still include) the mundane. These entanglements create a biographical (Evans 1993, Rapport 1999) backdrop to key informants' actions taken during the wedding, allowing deeper insights into their actions and decisions. Two, despite their special-ness, weddings still encapsulate the lived realities of diasporic individuals. This is because weddings are both scripted and spontaneous events, mimicking the expected and unexpected occurrences and surprises in everyday life. This implies that weddings are events *integral* to, and not set apart from social life.

Consociative Entanglements

The entanglement of different everyday lives is rooted in the consociative activities that construct weddings. Consociation (Dyck 2000) has been noted to be an integral part of contemporary social life. Consociation is defined as social interactions between individuals that create shared experiences and a sense of groupness and "community". A wedding is consociative by encompassing a flurry of social activity involving multiple individuals. It brings together groups of individuals who were previously strangers (to each other) in the form of guests, bridesmaids, groomsmen, long-lost relatives, new relatives, wedding professionals, bride, groom and so on. In order to execute the wedding these individuals have to co-operate most of the time and interact, bringing about rituals, events and activities. This suggests that a temporary and volatile "community" is forged in the wedding. This is useful because it means one is able to avoid old essentialistic notions or state-mandated categories of community. Consociation emphasises the *agency* of actors who *choose* to engage in interactions for the purpose of achieving a goal. In this way researchers are assured of a *meaningful social group* that can be approached to understand ethnicity-making.

Consociation also suggests an intense amount of interaction between individuals. As they interact so do they live their lives and bring their everyday way of doing things. Their lives become temporarily intertwined and messily entangled. Such entanglement articulates and reinterprets actions, performances and material practices in ways not previously seen or not seen at all in *mundane* everyday life. *It is in this entanglement that everyday lives are magnified and interpolated.*

This consociative entanglement (especially of extended kinship) also generates a *biographical field of family life-histories that surrounds my key informants and informs their*

actions. Phoebe, 32, a bride-to-be and civil servant, remarked “I found it strange that when it’s time for the wedding, we have to inform 20th Aunty, 3rd Grandaunt, cousin of my nephew etc etc. to come for the wedding, and then they get involved as well! I don’t see the point!” Phoebe was of course exaggerating, but her experiences with weddings (and her sister’s wedding in 2004) exemplified how disparate and distant family members become deeply involved in wedding preparations and rituals. These involvements create *personal histories in real-time that texture the material practices and consumption decisions of the bridal couple and their parents*. As Evans (1993) points out, it is by understanding the life-histories of the individual in question that we are better able to understand their practices. Weddings bring such life-histories to the researcher to witness. The bridal couple are literally enveloped in bubbles of different everyday experiences, creating an unfolding life-story of ethnicity-making, lineage, heritage and history rich in sociological meaning.

Disjunctive and Spontaneous Alterations to Templated Events

Weddings also mimic everyday life through their structures (or lack of) and patterns (or lack of) of events. This is evidenced in two ways - the first is that the disjunctiveness of weddings reflects the disjunctiveness of contemporary social life (Amit 2002). Individuals come together for short bursts of activity then depart. The second is the unpredictable mixing of scripted and spontaneous events. Weddings follow templates but are also opportunities for intervention and improvisation. This suggests that weddings are not just a *lens* onto everyday life; they are an integral part of everyday practice, even if they occur relatively rarely in each individual’s life.

Disjunction is characterised by the “weak” (Castells 1996), fleeting and temporary relationships individuals have with each other as they move both physically and socially in their everyday lives. Disjunction is rarely acknowledged in literature related to diaspora, especially that of transmigration (Basch 1994) and transnational community (Anderson 2006, Vertovec 2005). Instead, a “subtext of unity and stability” is often noted in “representations of de-territorialised relations (transmigration, borderlands)” (Amit 2002:35). This suggests that these studies are abstracted away from what goes on in the everyday life of individuals. More specifically, studies in weddings (especially anthropological studies) have tended to separate the wedding as a special event that exists outside of the realm of everyday life (Sniezek 2005). Weddings become rituals that represent a society’s values (Durkheim 2001) but do not appear to happen at any other time in any other form outside of the wedding day itself.

The problem is that weddings are often considered scripted and static rituals that are not practised in everyday life, thereby limiting their applicability to understanding the wider quotidian existence of individuals (Sniezek 2005). However, I argue that weddings are disjunctive and contain spontaneous events that can alter and modify pre-planned scripts,

thereby *becoming a crucible of everyday action and acting as a simulacrum for everyday life*. Disjunctiveness is exposed in weddings in the short, intense periods of weddings that appear then vanish, compressed even further in contemporary society¹. Within these short periods relationships created are often fleeting and temporal. Individuals come together to consociate, entangle and intersect. But they just as quickly disperse and disentangle from each other, going their separate ways. The point is driven home all the more in the way guests leave a wedding banquet. The bridal couple and their parents stand in a line outside the banquet hall to shake hands and say thank you. As each guest passes by some are given polite handshakes whilst closer friends receive fierce embraces or a tender hand on the shoulder. When they leave the line they quietly disperse into the night, sometimes not recognising or acknowledging the people whom they had just shared a meal with a table away from theirs. Groomsmen and bridesmaids congratulate each other on a good job, but quickly return to their own personal networks. Social relationships forged in weddings rarely seem to survive the wedding; they are fleeting, like quick friendships made on the go or while travelling. Over my 15 years as a wedding photographer I have made many acquaintances, but only a handful became friends whom I keep in constant contact with.

Spontaneous changes to pre-planned events in weddings are exposed in the way some rituals are negotiated on the spot, making them fluid in their execution and application. Sonia, 29, and Kian Wee, 32, are both architects and were married in 2005. Like many other weddings they staged a tea ceremony in Kian Wee's family home. Just before the tea ceremony Sonia sat in an air-conditioned bedroom to cool off while Kian Wee's mother, grandmother and aunt took charge of the proceedings. They gathered in a small huddle to discuss the sequence of tea serving, the way each elder should be addressed by the bridal couple when they serve tea, who should help hold the tray and so on. In this way I was witness to a planned and templated event (the tea ceremony) that was being made up as the wedding went along. Everyone knew they had to do it, but no one seemed quite clear what the nuances of the ritual were until they were confronted with having to do it. At times other families would buy the tea set but would be unsure of how to use it, or how to position themselves, and would sometimes turn to me as a wedding professional to orchestrate the ritual for them.

Such spontaneity implies that weddings are not just lenses onto everyday life, but they are concentrated and complicated instances of everyday life that extend the everyday. They embody the messiness of expected and unexpected, scripted and spontaneous actions that texture everyday routines. In other words, they are a *parable* of everyday life - a story with actors, laden with meaning and symptomatic of a wider existence. They are multi-linear narratives where different stories occur simultaneously in a small physical space, often

¹ A few wedding banquets are split into two to accommodate larger numbers; this is especially where one parent has many business associates.

branching off in different directions. Within these stories also lie the actions and practices of individuals. In the next section I will argue that weddings are maps of intersecting material practices that individuals perform to each other. These maps expose the social intimacies and distances between individuals and between individuals and ethnic lifestyles.

The Wedding is a Performative Map of Intersecting Material Practices

Weddings are highly material-centric affairs. They involve highly performative uses of aesthetic markers like clothing, food, ritual artefacts, decorations and material environments. These material practices, like diasporic journeys and everyday activities, intersect and collide with each other. What makes these intersections different and useful is that they reveal the social intimacies and distances between individuals and between ethnic lifestyles. Aesthetic markers are juxtaposed in close proximity to each other (chapter 8) through taste performances (which I will expand on in chapter 7). Finally, weddings expose socially prominent ethnic lifestyles through repetitive uses of certain aesthetic markers (brands, fashion, etc) and their enduring appeal to different individuals.

Material artefacts have been and continue to be an important aspect of weddings around the world. Scholars studying weddings conducted by other social groups have made similar observations about wedding-specific artefacts (Grimes 2000, Edwards 1987 in Japan, Chesser 1980 in North America, Rorie 1984 in Scotland, Bloch, Rao and Desai 2001 in India). Each of these studies notes how individuals in weddings make use of artefacts to make status claims or as a way of proclaiming certain social values or ideals. For example, the sweetness of a wedding cake in Japanese weddings is meant to signify that the marriage will be a happy one (Edwards 1987). The Singaporean Chinese wedding is no different. Walls and doors of homes are adorned with stickers depicting Chinese words. Red banners are strung over the doorway to home. Family altars are specially decorated with fruit, alcohol, seeds and candles.

Singaporean Chinese weddings are material-centric because objects are central to the dynamics of social relationships between individuals and to the ethnic lifestyles they espouse during the wedding. Each ritual, practice or event in the wedding is usually either centred *around* an object, or involves the *use* of an object for it to be successful, regardless of the religious, commercial or cultural context. They take on a special importance in weddings, and sometimes even mundane items (combs, towels, basins, baskets) need to be specially purchased from specialist wedding shops (chapter 9). Individuals interact whilst *using* objects (wearing jewellery, eating food, using incense sticks), *occupying* objects (sitting in the bridal car, dinner in the banquet hall) and *producing* objects (taking wedding photographs and videos, forging ritual artefacts from mundane objects). The object thus acts as a *medium* through which social interaction occurs.

Conspicuous consumption in weddings (Mead 2007, Otnes and Pleck 2003) also suggests that material practices in weddings are highly performative. Individuals use aesthetic markers in an outward-facing fashion for other individuals to observe and interact with. This is an especially important concept because it exposes the way material practices *intersect* with each other, and the way individuals purposefully expose their lifestyles for others to see. In chapter 7 I will argue that individuals expose their ethnic lifestyles and ethnic tastes in what I term “taste performances”. Taste performances will form the cornerstone of my study on the mechanisms of ethnicity-making (shaping of ethnic tastes) in chapters 8 and 9. Furthermore, in chapter 9 I will argue that conspicuous consumption (and social emulation (Veblen 2005)) reveals the connections between ethnic lifestyles and economic wealth, and how commercialised activities encourage and perpetuate such connections.

The wedding banquet is a pertinent example of objects as mediums of social interaction and a conspicuous consumption of ethnic lifestyles. Individuals spend large sums of money on wedding banquets in Singapore - typical banquets host 40 tables of 10 to 11 individuals each, with some banquets going to as high as 150 tables. Each table costs anywhere from SGD\$368 (approx £184) to SGD\$1288 (approx £644)². Banquet halls are lavish affairs, allowing for individuals to exhibit their wealth as well as social status. At the same time, the “style” of wedding banquets often alludes to non-Chinese, “Western” cultural forms, creating a stage on which individuals may display their preferences for some ethnic lifestyles over others. In chapter 9 I will expand greatly on wedding banquets, and how they are *theatres of ethnic taste*.

Conclusion

Material practices, their intersections and their outward-facing performative attributes all contribute to exposing the researcher to the social intimacies and distances that individuals make or maintain in their everyday lives, or in other words, their social trajectories. This is crucial in understanding ethnicity-making as individuals are continuously steering their trajectories in different directions (as expressed in changes to their ethnic tastes). But more than that is the wedding’s ability to become a junction where diasporic journeys, everyday lives and individuals themselves meet, intersect, collide and interact. The collision of diasporic journeys creates biographical insights into the life-paths of my key informants - the wedding couple, whilst the meeting of everyday lives means that the wedding is both a window into the lives of Chinese Singaporeans *as well as* an integral part of their quotidian existence.

All these intersections, entanglements and collisions occur in a very short time span. The wedding is a burst of activity that sparks then fades in a matter of hours. It is intensely

²http://www.singaporebrides.com/banquet_price.php?day=Both&capacity=Any&budget=Any&sort=Price

consociative then suddenly disjunctive. Very little remains of a wedding when it is over besides a newly married couple, a wedding album, some leftover alcohol and a large invoice for professional services. This chapter argued for the wedding as an efficacious site of study for ethnicity-making, but it has not yet answered *how* a researcher should approach the wedding and gather data. In the next chapter I will map out my methodologies for examining weddings, drawing upon my professional practice as a wedding photographer and my own biographical story as a Chinese Singaporean.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction and Overview

In this chapter I will outline the methods that I have used to explore productions of Singaporean Chineseness. I have chosen to employ a *visually-focussed* form of participant observation (Jorgensen 1989, Hall 1976, Vesperi 1985). I will explain the benefits of participant observation to situations of everyday life (Dyck 2000, Latour and Woolgar 1979) and how a visually-focussed form of it makes the implicitness of race and ethnicity in everyday life explicit, tangible and observable. I will map out the three characteristics of visually-focussed participant observation – the use of a camera as a fulcrum upon which interaction between researcher and informant balance upon (Back 2004), the creation of visual field notes that use mundane recordings as an extension of a researcher’s visual perception, and the integral role of images and the visual in the presentation of a researcher’s data¹ (Knowles and Harper 2009).

My participant observations relied on short but intense in-depth case studies (Becker et al 1961, Yin 1984) of 69 Singaporean Chinese weddings spanning 7 years of insider participation (Becker 1963, Jules-Rosette 1975) as a wedding photographer. I will show the steps I took to become a wedding photographer and how I secured access into weddings. I will highlight how I transformed my professional practice and interest into a sociological problem to be investigated, but initially found it difficult to divorce myself from what was primarily a “native” setting – meaning me as a Chinese Singaporean amongst other Chinese Singaporeans and as a wedding professional who was a subject matter expert of wedding rituals. I will also map out how I made observations and captured my data during the wedding through the use of a digital camera, and how I recorded and archived my images as visual field notes.

I have also chosen to supplement observations by gathering documents (Jorgensen 1989) in the form of autobiographical poetry, interviews and internet forum postings. Poetry used in this thesis acts as semi-autobiographical notes of my own life experiences and diasporic journeys as a Chinese Singaporean and as a Chinese Singaporean who participates in weddings. My interviews consisted of 9 semi-structured interviews. My interviewees were chosen based on willingness, socio-economic background and rapport. Each interview was recorded on a video-camera, digitised into an electronic format then transcribed for analysis.

¹ As part of my participant observations, I have chosen to utilise photographs as a primary and integrated form of data (Pink 2007) which complements rather than supplements text. However, in order to fully capitalise on the advantages that photographs confer on social research, I have devised a methodological framework in which photographs may be read as visual poetry, and captions attached to these photographs may be written as poetry. I will deal with this framework in-depth in chapter 5.

Internet forum postings were based on previous research done on virtual communities and wedding portals (Heng 2007), and acted as a pathway into the experiences of certain social groups whose weddings I had little opportunity to participate in. Finally, I will outline the ethical considerations of this research, especially regarding photographs and commercial photography.

A Visually-focussed form of Participant Observation

Participant observation has been shown by scholars to be a particularly effective tool in understanding meaning-making (Gallimeier 1987) from an insider's point of view (Hall 1976) in everyday life (Jorgensen 1989). It is an important aspect of ethnographies (Dyck 2000) but in itself does not constitute ethnography. Participant observation has been carried out in a variety of social groups, from laboratories (Latour and Woolgar 1979) to fundamentalist Christian schools (Peshkin 1986) to police forces (Holdaway 1982). I argue that participant observation is particularly suited to this thesis for the following reasons. One, each wedding involves a vastly different set of individuals from another. Whilst I have met the same participant in two different weddings, this was more a case of coincidence than design. Weddings are concentrated and intense events, but they are also brief and fleeting. Research methods which would require a longer period of time spent with the same group of individuals would not have been feasible. Two, my professional practice as a wedding photographer has granted me a convenient path into my field of study as a participant observer. Participant observation appeared to be the most intuitive step at the point where I decided to investigate ethnicity-making in wedding rituals. Three, given my argument involves an investigation into the *making* of ethnicity; it only makes sense that I observe ethnicity as it is made, rather than asking individuals how they make their ethnicity in an interview or focus group format. If weddings are particularly effective windows into everyday life, then participant observation is a particularly effective window into weddings.

Participant observers use various methods to record and collect their observations, including photography. However, photography is rarely used as a *primary* form of observation that complements textual observations. Often it is relegated to a secondary role that supports what a researcher has observed, and this is especially so in Sociology (Twine 2006) with a few exceptions (Back 2004, Knowles and Harper 2006). In other disciplines like Anthropology and especially Visual Anthropology (Banks 2001, Pink 2007), the photograph becomes more important for the researcher to convey her findings, but this is more an exception than the norm in the social sciences.

I propose that a *visually-focussed form of participant observation* can extend and capitalise on participant observation's strengths, especially when it comes to understanding the processes of ethnicity-making. A visually-focussed form of participant observation makes implicit

makings of ethnicity explicit for both researcher and reader. It powerfully exposes the everyday ethnic inscriptions by individuals onto themselves as well as their environments in a concise, compact and layered manner. Making my research primarily *visual* is a way to be sociologically sympathetic to the visualness of race and ethnicity (Solomos and Back 1996).

A visually-focussed form of participant observation has the following characteristics. One, it employs the camera (still or moving) as the fulcrum upon which participant observation is performed, much in the same way Pinney's (1997) camera became a point of mediation between him and his informants in rural India. The camera mediates between the researcher and her informant, providing not just a means for recording, but acting as a way to create rapport, maintain relationships, gain access and generate non-verbal communication. During my participant observation I used the camera as a key tool for my insider role, leveraging on my skills as a photographer to gain entry into each wedding. As I observed each wedding I photographed it, meaning the camera stood as a middleman between my informants and me. I saw the wedding literally through a lens, and conversely my informants interacted with me through a lens as well.

The camera also acted as a conversation-starter with informants I had only just met at the wedding. Oftentimes wedding participants were curious about my craft, what photographs I was taking and even my role. A common question would be if photography was a full time job, to which I took the opportunity to tell them about my research and ask them more questions about the wedding. Other times the camera become a tool of reciprocity (Nader 1986, Schensul et al 1999), allowing me to establish rapport with non-key informants like friends of the bride/groom or family members by taking a posed photograph for them (not part of my key responsibilities), or photographing their child and offering to email them the photographs on a non-commercial, personal basis.

Two, a visually-focussed form of participant observation leverages on the persistent presence of a camera to generate *visual field notes* (See Appendix 4A for samples). Visual field notes are *additional* mundane recordings of a field by the researcher. They can include images of buildings and doorways where events are taking place, portraits of informants, sequential photographs of actions and interactions, images of artefacts (both everyday and ritualistic) and so on. Visual field notes are a way for a participant observer to generate field notes *without* pausing the act of photography (or filming). As Jorgensen (1989) points out, the "camera is an *extension* of visual perception" (1989:103, emphases added).

Visual field notes do not entirely replace textually-driven field notes, but they exist to form the bulk of a researcher's experience. Visual field notes are different from saturation photography or photographic inventories (Collier and Collier 1986). They do not exist to create a literal memory of a place or scene. Instead, they act as guides to remind a researcher of the spaces

and places where she has been, what she has observed, and what are the things, people or actions she might have missed (Hall 1976, Vesperi 1985). In this sense, visual field notes take on a realist perspective (Pink 2007, Sontag 1977), but they are only as “realistic” as the researcher chooses to view them. These photographs may differ from photographs presented as data, and I will expand on this in chapter 5 when I discuss the use and presentation of photographs in this thesis. I will also discuss how I created visual field notes in the next section.

Three, a visually-focussed form of participant observation *produces images* (in this case still photographs) as an integrated part of a researcher’s fieldwork, data and findings *in conjunction with text*, building upon a fledgling canon of work that gives text and photography equal status (Knowles and Harper 2009). Images are not relegated to supporting documents or evocative supplements - they are used more efficiently in situations where text might falter, especially when providing the social, emotional or cultural “texture” of one’s field of study (Rose 2006:204).

Because of the importance of the visual in this thesis, I have chosen to discuss my photographic practice; visual methodological framework and the way text and photography interact in a *separate chapter which follows this one*. Suffice to say for now, photographs in this thesis will do the following things – one, they will immerse the reader into the social, cultural and ethnic landscape of my informants in chapter 6. Two, they will complement textual observations and reinforce my interpretations drawn from participant observation in chapters 7, 8 and 9. Three, they will capture the raw emotions of the productions of transdiasporic ethnicity in my epilogue (Edwards 1997, Pink 2007, Rose 2006), creating an evocative summary of the social costs of economic progress amongst transdiasporic individuals.

Starting in the Field – Transforming Professional Practice and Personal Experience into Social Research

My sociological interest in weddings, participant observation and ethnicity stemmed from a realisation that my experiences, professional practice and life-story had the potential to be a semi-auto-biographical resource (Dyck 2000, Wulff 2000) for social research. I experienced the wedding industry’s transition from film to digital, saw the changes in fashion and practices between the 1990s and 2000s, and watched as Singapore changed socially, economically, politically and aesthetically and witnessed how these changes were reflected in wedding rituals and mundane everyday life.

Singaporean Chinese weddings continue to fascinate me. Despite growing up with some of these rituals, I was largely naïve to this aspect of my Chineseness. My family is an example of

Singapore's successes as well as its social sacrifices (Kong and Yeoh 2003). I am firmly categorised by my peers and the state as a "cosmopolitan", third-generation Chinese Singaporean (Chua 2003). I speak English as a first language, I attended a private English-speaking mission school and I was educated in a university overseas. I have never lived in state-subsidised housing, and both my parents are university graduates. At the same time my grandparents belonged to a generation that built Singapore but became lost in it. Such was the price for economic progress and the construction of a nation-state (PuruShotam 1998).

Starting my research involved transforming my professional practice as a wedding photographer into social research. Although I began professional photography in 2003, it was only in 2004 when I was researching the connection between online wedding forums and offline wedding practices that I chose to use weddings as a site for social research. Instead of gaining access and acceptance from the outside, I had to "de-nativise" myself from an environment I had become comfortable in (being a wedding photographer) and was an insider of (being Chinese Singaporean). The process meant constantly re-evaluating what was in front of me, and treating things I had taken for granted as new and odd again.

This act of becoming *less* of an insider also meant that I had to learn to balance my professional responsibilities in a wedding with my academic responsibilities as a participant observer. There would be times one role would overshadow the other, and this process of balancing continues to unfold as my own personal journey. Such difficulties highlight the limitations and pitfalls of insider participant observation and insider ethnographies. For example, becoming the phenomenon that a researcher is studying (Jorgensen 1989) can sometimes mean that the researcher's multiple roles come into conflict, as was the case of Rambo (1987) who studied exotic dancing by becoming an exotic dancer herself. However, such a deep involvement as an insider is also beneficial by preventing othering and personal biases (Hastrup 1992) and allowing one's personal experience to biographically inform the field one is studying (Dyck 2000).

Performing Participant Observation

Every wedding is a single event that involves different sets of individuals. This means that even as an insider at every wedding, I had to constantly negotiate new access to each wedding. In order to participate in and observe weddings, I had to be hired to photograph them. Gaining access was thus a case of marketing myself as a wedding photographer to bridal couples. I achieved this through both word-of-mouth as well as advertising on Singapore's most well-known wedding portal, Singaporebrides.com. I listed myself under the directory for "Actual-Day" photographers, focussing on the wedding day rather than pre-wedding studio and location photography. This listing provided more than 80% of the weddings I participated in since 2003.

The process of being hired (and gaining access) would typically be like this – one half of a bridal couple, usually the bride, would see my listing on Singaporebrides.com. She would visit my website and view my portfolio and if interested would contact me for a preliminary meeting. I would meet her and her fiancé at a café in the city, where I would show the types of photo albums they could order, and discuss their needs. This was also the point at which I would inform them that I was researching weddings. Some would hire me on the spot; others would let me know a few weeks later. Once the couple had hired me I would draft a contract. We would then not normally be in contact until a week before the wedding where I would be emailed a timetable of the wedding and a time and place for me to start.

Between 2003² and 2010 I observed and recorded 75 weddings, of which I chose 69 to use for this thesis. 2 weddings were not included because my professional relationship with these couples had deteriorated, and 1 was omitted on request of a couple who wished to keep their photographs private. 3 other weddings photographed in 2003 were omitted because of a transitional period I experienced between film and digital cameras which meant I was still experimenting with the technology. In all, I created approximately 43,000 images for use as data and visual field notes over a period of 7 years. Each wedding I observed would involve anywhere from 4 to 16 hours of participant observation. A typical Singaporean Chinese wedding starts between 5am to 8am, and depends on various factors like beliefs in “auspicious” start-times, rituals and the availability of the bride’s make-up artist. Morning ceremonies would normally last 5 to 6 hours, followed by an afternoon break, then an evening banquet in which my participation would last another 6 hours. If the couple chose to have a Christian ceremony, there would sometimes be an additional 3 to 4 hour church service between morning and evening rituals.

Appendix 4B is a grid of wedding shoots and pre-wedding photoshoots that I have chosen to use as data. Appendix 4B lists out the 2 key informants in each wedding - the bride and groom. They have been given appropriate pseudonyms (see *Ethical Considerations* later in this chapter) and I have recorded their age at the time of the wedding, occupation, educational qualification and housing type (where they lived before they were married). Some couples while happy to help were at times unwilling to disclose some personal information like age, occupation and educational qualifications – age being particularly sensitive if there was an uncommon age disparity between bride and groom. Where information was not divulged I have appended an “NA” as “Not Available”.

² I chose 2003 as the starting point in which I would consider photographs as data because it was at this point that I started wedding photography on a professional basis – meaning I advertised, created a portfolio and set out formal contracts with clients. It was also the point at which I started to photograph weddings in a more evocative manner. Previous weddings comprised mostly mundane, posed images that while being of some ethnographic value, would not have done any more than similar mundane images taken after 2003.

My role as a wedding photographer meant I had a particularly intimate and inside look into the lives of my informants as they prepared for the wedding. Rather than seeing the bride only during rituals, I was privy to her getting her make-up done, and could witness the goings-on in her home as her family made their own preparations. This level of access was granted because of the dominant market expectations of wedding photographers in Singapore. My primary responsibilities at each wedding included the following

- Chronologically photograph all wedding preparations and rituals
- Photograph various core wedding artefacts like the wedding gown, rings, jewellery, bridal car, wedding decorations and so on
- Photograph posed group pictures of the bridal couple, their family and friends, including one photograph per table (anywhere from 10 to 90) at the wedding banquet

While I carried out these responsibilities I would also photograph individuals, artefacts, environments and interactions that exposed the way Singaporean Chineseness was made. These would sometimes overlap with the “mandatory” images I had to take at each wedding, but at the end of the wedding all photographs were handed over to the bridal couple in a DVD-Rom.

The photographs I captured acted both as items for the wedding album to be delivered to clients as well as a basis for my visual field notes. Initial, raw photographs from the wedding would act as jot notes (Bernard 1995), documenting the wedding as I observed it. They would then be expanded upon into visual field notes that acted both as an extended descriptive record of each wedding (Sanjek 1990) as well as a diary of my experiences and participation (Mead 1977). Marshall and Rossman (2006:109), using O’Hearn Curran’s (1997) study on kindergarten teachers demonstrated how field notes might be taken, using a two column approach of description on the left and interpretive speculation on the right. Visual field notes are similar, but complement the descriptive column with images taken, followed by short realist captions (Edwards 1997) of the scene I observed. In this way I was able to associate specific images with particular actors, actions and artefacts. I also took the following steps to archive and categorise my visual field notes

- Each wedding photographed was captured in high-resolution JPEG images with EXIF data; ensuring time/date/technical information was retained.
- Once the wedding was over, images were transferred to my computer and stored under a folder specific to the wedding
- Each image was given its own unique filename of GroomNameBrideName_### where ### denoted an integer

Visual field notes were created in Microsoft Word post-wedding where specific images were edited in Photoshop then pasted and annotated for reference. Appendix 4A gives a sample of such visual field notes from selected weddings.

Autobiographical Poetry and Participant Observation

Participant observation also meant interpreting the wedding from my own perspective as a Chinese Singaporean. This meant that my observations and interpretations of weddings and ethnicity-making were textured by my own life and my own experiences. Such texturing meant that this study was at some points semi-autobiographical, drawing upon my own understandings of what it meant to be Singaporean Chinese, similar to Ang's (2001) autobiographical account of overseas Chinese in Australia, Europe and Indonesia. Auto/biographical narratives have been proven to be especially useful in the study of race and ethnicity making (Alibhai-Brown 1995, Kenan 1999, McBride 1996, Merton 1988). It "reveals some of the dynamics of lives and the activities of living...exposing the substance of the lives in which ethnicity and race operate tactically..." (Knowles 2003:53).

Unlike other sociology-related autobiographers (Ang 2001, Kenan 1999, McBride 1996) whose narrative genre tend to be in prose, my own autobiographical narrative is embedded in the *poetry* that I write. Poetry in this thesis acts as a sociological tool for self-reflexivity *and* autobiography. I have been a poet longer than a photographer, publishing in various significant poetry anthologies in Singapore (Heng 2000, 2002) and in 2004 published my own collection of poetry, acting as an evocative diary of my life as a Chinese Singaporean in both Singapore and the United Kingdom. I continued to write poetry as I conducted participant observation, especially when I was particularly affected by the lives of my informants. Poetry was my way of documenting my own diasporic journey and my own ways of making Singaporean Chineseness. My poetry created a semi-autobiographical layer which I mapped onto my visually-focussed participant observation. Poetry in this sense also became a sociological tool to further expose the everyday lives of both informant and researcher.

Although participant observation remained as the primary way for me to collect data, a poetic, semi-autobiographical layer added two important things. One, it allowed me to create an emotional link with some of my informants. It was a way to understand from an insider point of view the difficulties some of them (particularly first generation Chinese Singaporeans) experienced in interacting with others because I experienced the same thing with my grandparents. Two, it generated an extra layer of meaning onto my visual field notes and photographs by superimposing a *personalised* lens onto my observation. I arranged the photographs that I wished to present in the form of photo-collections (see Chapter 5) and then matched, where appropriate, a poem I had written that sympathised with a specific

photograph. The poems acted both as evocative captions that transcended mundane realist captions, and developed the photograph in a non-linear, multi-layered manner. In chapter 5 I will expand further on the interface between poetry and photographs. Suffice to say for now, poetry and photography formed an integrated, semi-autobiographical bond when I carried out my fieldwork and when I presented my data.

Supplementary Interviews

As part of participant observation, I collected supplementary documents in the form of video-taped interviews (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:162 on the advantages of recording interviews) and internet forum postings (Hine 2000, Miller and Slater 2000). I conducted 9 interviews in all (7 video interviews, 1 written and 1 instant messenger), comprising 2 individuals, 3 couples and 4 groups of 2 individuals or more. Appendix 4C shows the demographic breakdown of these interviews. I approached each individual / group when the opportunity arose and when they showed a willingness to be interviewed further about the wedding. Such willingness was expressed both in the form of a strong working or social relationship with the couple, or during informal conversations during the wedding itself.

4 sets of interviewees involved ex-clients who had hired me to either photograph their wedding or their family. The other 5 sets were social contacts that were interested in my research and were willing to offer their perspective on weddings and Chineseness. In the case of Charlotte and Harry, I had learnt from friends that Charlotte's mother adhered strongly to "traditional" norms about weddings and had set out to perform a variety of "traditional" rituals. I approached Charlotte and Harry to find out their wedding experience, and what it meant to them as Chinese Singaporeans.

The interviews I conducted consisted of casual semi-structured formats. Such interviews were especially effective because it allowed me to sidestep the problem of the "interviewer effect" (Brewer 2000). The following steps were taken when conducting semi-structured supplementary interviews.

- I arranged each interview at one of the following locations - the informants' homes, my home or a neutral location like a café. Where possible, I arranged it such that the interview was done over a meal and in a conversational manner (Burgess 1984) which allowed my informants (especially the bridal couple) to remember and reflect on their wedding.
- Each interview lasted for about an hour and was video-taped, which allowed me to later examine the facial expressions and gestures of my informants when they gave their answers.

- Once I recorded each interview I would digitise it and transcribe the conversation onto paper for further analysis. Only once was there a spontaneous interview over dinner with an ex-client where I was not prepared with a video camera (Millie, Boon Leng and Rebecca) and had to transcribe the interview in real-time.

Interviews did two important things in this thesis. One, where the interviewees were my ex-clients, interviews became a way for me to confirm or challenge the interpretations I made during my participant observation of that particular wedding. Where possible, I would also bring along photographs of the wedding, either in the form of the wedding album or a selection of images I was more curious about, and use these to elicit answers. This was not as systematic as a photo-elicitation interview (Prosser 1998) but drew upon techniques other photo-elicitation interviewers like Twine (2006) used when studying married and family life. In these interviews, I would not use the photographs exclusively; rather I would engage in a conversation with my interviewees and where appropriate, produce a photograph from the wedding.

Two, interviews opened up a secondary layer of participant observation, allowing me access to weddings I was unable to participate in. In order to participate in weddings, I had to be commissioned by individuals looking to hire a photographer. This process took anywhere from 6 months to 1.5 years per wedding. The geographical distance between Singapore and the United Kingdom meant that it was not possible for me to accept all bookings, or compress all weddings observed into 12 continuous months of situating myself in Singapore. Interviews increased the number of different weddings I could gain an understanding from, and created a more diverse and richly layered set of data in which I could create my understandings of ethnicity-making. It was for this reason I sought out individuals whose wedding I had not attended and did not photograph. Similarly, I used online wedding forums to expand the socio-economic demographic of my data sets. In the next section I will map out how I approached a popular online wedding forum and how I gathered data from forum postings.

Internet Forum Postings

One of the main challenges to participant observation in weddings was the restrictive socio-economic demographic I was presented with. In Appendix 4B, my grid showed that virtually all my clients had received a tertiary education (polytechnic diploma, university degree or above) and worked in white-collar jobs. Almost all of them (with the exception of one) lived in three-room HDB flats or larger. Almost all of them also spoke English with a minimum level of fluency.

Such a restriction was due to several factors. One, when advertising myself as a wedding photographer, I acted alone as an independent vendor. I did not create collaborations with

bridal studios in Singapore, who often sell mass-market “all-in-one” packages of gown, car, decorations, flowers and photography services to bridal couples. This meant that my clientele were restricted to individuals who sought “boutique” or customisable photography services. Two, my style of photography did not seem to appeal to a wider set of individuals. One potential client commented on an online forum discussing my work as being too abstract³. Others felt that my photography was too “dark” or moody, and hence not in line with the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic (see Chapter 9). Finally, as some of the weddings I photographed were based on word-of-mouth, some clients tended to be friends of other clients. These associations meant that I would find myself dealing with individuals from similar socio-economic backgrounds, as scholars in differential association have noted (Bottero 2005, Prandy and Bottero 1998). In order to widen my data set, I made use of online wedding forums. Singaporebrides.com, the website that I advertised my photography services on, hosts one of the biggest and most used wedding forums in Singapore. Threads are as diverse as relationship issues, wedding preparations, renovation ideas for matrimonial homes, second-hand marketplaces and motherhood concerns.

I chose Singaporebrides.com for the following reasons. One, Singaporebrides.com is the largest and most visited wedding directory and forum in Singapore. It has for the last four years placed first in Hitwise rankings for the “Lifestyle – Wedding” category⁴. Such a large following implied a potentially wide socio-economic range of individuals. Two, online forums on Singaporebrides.com are public and do not require registration to enter. Furthermore, all identities, unless explicitly revealed, are anonymised under usernames. As such, posters appeared to be more willing to reveal information that they would otherwise have not given in face-to-face interviews. For example, in one section entitled “Matters of the Heart”⁵ forum posters divulged everything from divorce proceedings to wedding night sexual encounters to extra-marital affairs. A public and anonymised forum allowed for an easier time to gather data without worry of privacy intrusions (Hine 2000).

I spent three years between 2005-2008 observing online forum boards whilst simultaneously engaging in participant observation in offline weddings. I drew information from 2079 posts from 18 threads, most of which discuss specific ritual artefacts in weddings, practices or individuals’ experiences with other participants (particularly parents of the bridal couple). Appendix 4D shows a grid of these threads and the relevant URL locations. The following steps were taken to access, retrieve and archive posts from forum message boards.

- I would first specifically target a topic, ritual or experience in an offline wedding that I felt I needed more information about. For instance, did other individuals

³ I stopped advertising on Singaporebrides.com in 2009 which led to this thread being unexpectedly deleted from the forums.

⁴ <http://www.singaporebrides.com/about.php#>

⁵ <http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/5/5.html?1280741157>

have different experiences? How did they enact a specific ritual or use a specific artefact? Was the ritual specific to this wedding or was it more commonplace?

- Using the Search Engine on Singaporebrides.com's forum⁶, I would do a keyword search of the ritual or artefact. For example, I wanted to learn more about individual experiences of the *Siu De* (Roasted Pig) and contemporary adaptations of the practice.
- Each search would involve a keyword in the message text of posts (not just their subject lines) and would look under posts made in the last 365 days
- I would then draw informative accounts from these posts. I would note the following
 - Poster's username
 - Thread URL
 - Time and Date when post was made
 - I would assign keywords like "Tradition", "Conflict" to each post
- Appendix 4E shows a sample of posts recorded using the method above.

These accounts were then collated into quotations that supplemented my observations and contributed to my overall interpretation of ethnicity making in wedding rituals. Because of the apparent permanency of the posts, I did not archive entire threads onto my local computer. Rather, important threads were bookmarked (Appendix 4D) and revisited online so that I could watch the discussion grow and develop.

Ethical Considerations

There are two main ethical concerns to participant observation. The first is my dual-role as wedding photographer and researcher. The second is the use of photographs to record interactions, as well as their presentation as data in the thesis. In this section I will show that my dual roles adhere to the British Sociological Association's (BSA) guidelines on ethnographic approaches, and that I have taken every precaution in addressing the privacy, confidentiality and well-being of my informants, especially with regards to photography.

My dual-role of photographer and participant observer always ran the risk of becoming a covert operation⁷. This is because in the act of fulfilling my professional duties my status as a researcher was sometimes overlooked in the heat of the action. However, I have taken specific steps to make known my dual status as professional and researcher. Ethical

⁶ See Appendix 4D for a screenshot of the search engine

⁷ Although covert observation/participation is allowed in extreme circumstances by BSA guidelines, it is normally not recommended to be the first course of action where other possibilities remain open to the researcher (Reynolds 1982, Erikson 1982, Bulmer 1982). It is only when access is likely to be closed completely, or when restrictions placed by gatekeepers prevent one from conducting research should covert observation/participation be employed (Brewer 2000).

guidelines from the BSA that informed consent should be sought as often as possible, meaning that participants should understand the scope and scale of the study being undertaken⁸.

I have achieved disclosure in two ways. The first is through my website, where I pointed out in my bio that I am a postgraduate conducting social research. Individuals who viewed my portfolio would thus be *pre-informed* about my dual status. The second occurred before the wedding, when I met with my clients to show them my printed portfolio; I made clear my intentions about how my wedding photography was not just a professional but an academic practice as well. In situations where I used information / photographs from weddings done before I started on this ethnographic project, I have made sure that I retain email contact with these informants and ask for their consent post hoc, as the BSA guidelines have indicated (see Brewer 2000:93).

During the wedding where my professional role tends to overshadow my research role, I did not hide my research intentions from other participants. Part of being a photographer involves a great deal of socialising during lull periods, of which there are many in a wedding. Conversations are started and invariably the topic of my research comes up. In my experience, this actually *improved* my relationships with participants at the wedding, as most, if not all found such an investigation interesting and wanted to help. One particular example was the sister of Joo Hong, a groom, who voluntarily arranged for her mother to join in into a structured interview I conducted after the wedding. This interview was one of the rare moments I was able to show the photographs I had taken at a wedding, and ask a deeply-involved participant about how she felt and responded to the different aesthetic markers used.

Presenting Informants and Quotations

Data from interviews are presented as quotes in the chapters that follow. For ethical reasons, my informants remained anonymous, and where possible, not linked to specific photographs. In Appendix 4B, I anonymised my key informants by creating appropriate pseudonyms and by restricting wedding dates to month and year. Anonymising names means that when an informant has an English name, an English pseudonym was assigned, and when an informant has a Mandarin or Dialect name, a corresponding Mandarin or Dialect pseudonym was assigned. When referring to informants in this thesis, I used their pseudonym drawn from Appendix 4B as well as their age and occupation. There are also instances where an individual quoted or observed is a peripheral informant – this could be a supporting participant like a fellow wedding professional, a groomsman or a parent of the bride. For these

⁸ <http://www.britsoc.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/468F236C-FFD9-4791-A0BD-4DF73F10BA43/0/StatementofEthicalPractice.doc>

individuals I have also noted their occupation and role in the wedding when I quote or mention them, and have anonymised them as well.

I have also chosen to specify only the month and year my informants were married. Whilst I recorded the exact day on which I participated in each wedding, the time spent per wedding meant that only one could be photographed per day, and as such meant that couples could be traced by their date of marriage registration. I thus chose to remove the specific day to ensure an additional layer of anonymity.

Quotations from internet resources were handled similarly, but utilised the username of the individual who made the claim. The Association of Internet Researchers recommends that online researchers consider the purpose of the study as well as the amount of privacy afforded to participants⁹. All quotations that I have used are in the public domain as one, the forum is accessible to anyone without the need for registration or log-in and two, users are protected with the option of anonymous usernames, and are allowed to link / unlink their online profiles from public view at will.

The Ethics of Professional Wedding Photography in Social Research

There is a significant and important difference between photographs of a wedding and wedding photography. The former implies the photographer was not present in any official or paid capacity, instead taking photographs for the express purpose of research or other personal reasons. The latter implies that the photographer was present as one who was *explicitly expected* to photograph and document the wedding. As I have noted above, my photography and role is situated firmly in the latter, and this informs the ethical decisions that need to be made. In this section I intend to focus on the ethical implications of using wedding photographs. Wedding photographs, especially commissioned photographs, in social research have two main areas of ethical contention – copyright and privacy. I will deal with each in turn.

⁹ <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>

Copyright

According to Singapore law (the place in which these photographs were taken), consent is needed from individuals who have commissioned me as a professional photographer should I wish to reproduce their images¹⁰. I considered the bridal couple (key informants) as the main gatekeepers to the copyright of the wedding photographs. Consent was usually sought from them during our first meeting when I presented my portfolio. I have found that bridal couples and their families in Singapore are more than willing to help with my research, and in only one wedding, due to privacy reasons, was I asked not to reproduce any photographs for either professional or academic purposes.

My photographs also included individuals present at the wedding who did *not* commission me to photograph them. These individuals are usually everyone else but the bride and groom. In this case these photographs still belong to a commissioned body of work from the bridal couple. As such, I have found it sufficient to seek consent for the reproduction of these photographs from the bridal couple of that particular wedding. Furthermore, as the reproduction of these images are for an academic, rather than a commercial purpose, my clients are more often than not unperturbed with the idea of being placed in a thesis.

Privacy

Privacy is a key consideration in wedding photography due to the intimate access to informants often granted to the photographer. The wedding photographer is often expected to photograph not just very public and outward rituals, but the private moments like the bride having her make-up put on, or the preparations for the banquet that goes on in the bridal suite. At times, the photographer is granted exceptional access to rituals meant to be shared only between bride and groom, as the image below shows. In that particular wedding, the bridal couple (Paige, 24 and Finn, 26) were expected to consume *tang yuen* (sticky flour balls in sweet syrup) away from the eyes of all guests, including family, at the wedding. I was asked to follow them into the bedroom to capture this scene.

¹⁰ Section 12, Chapter 1.5 and 1.6 of the Intellectual Property Law of Singapore states

12.1.5 The general rule is that the person who created a work is the owner of the copyright in the work. However, another person is the owner if the work was created by the creator in the course of his employment by that person.

12.1.6 Additionally, if the person who created the work is a photographer or artist engaged to take a photograph of a person or to draw the portrait of a person, the person would be the copyright owner and he has the right to prevent the photographer or artist from using the photograph or painting for any purpose that he has not agreed to.



Above: As if I wasn't there

Having this level of access means that some photographs taken during the wedding are of an intimate and personal nature. As such, I have taken steps to make specific choices about the photographs that appear in this thesis, and have set the following guidelines for myself.

- *Particulars of individuals revealed in the photographs should not compromise their subsequent safety or well-being in any way – including financially or politically.* For example, passwords written on fridge magnets or post-it notes will discount the use of the photograph that displays them. James and Dawson (1997) have stressed this by noting that researchers need to be aware of the personal, social and political implications when publishing photographs
- *Individuals should remain anonymous where possible.* As I will show in my photo collections, my photography is not wholly dependent on faces and facial expressions of individuals. Instead, my photography interrogates the movement and positioning of bodies in their material environment. I have leveraged on this style to keep as many of my subjects anonymous as possible, and through this anonymity I will be able to safeguard their personal spaces *more* than I had photographed them face on. This is similar in ways to Perivolaris' *Migrados* work on migrants in Spain (2004, see Pink 2007:30), where most of his subjects faced away from the camera.
- *Every photograph used in this thesis has been made available to the gatekeepers (key informants).* As part of the informed consent process, I have also made sure that all photographs taken during the wedding is delivered in high resolution on a

DVD to my clients. Whilst this may seem obvious, it is common practice in Singapore for wedding professionals to retain the high resolution copies in order to profit from reprints. Ensuring that my informants have every photograph allows them to change their mind about allowing me to use their photographs for research, should they find something objectionable in the DVD.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explained how I employed a *visually-focussed* form of participant observation to gather data and interact with my informants. In my participant observation of 69 weddings I was able to achieve an intimate look into the everyday lives of my informants, from their mundane living arrangements to their liminal and transitory spaces to rarely seen interpersonal relationships. These views afforded me important access into the ways individuals produced transdiasporic ethnicities, and what being Singaporean Chinese meant to them. I supplemented my participant observation with supplementary interviews and internet forum postings which deepened my understanding and appreciation of the rituals and actions I had observed in weddings. At the heart of all these methods lay the visual, with the camera being the fulcrum upon which I gained access, built rapport, gathered data and presented my findings. In the next chapter I will build a methodological framework in which my photographs, observations and semi-autobiographical notes may be weaved into a coherent whole.

Chapter 5: Poetry and Photography in Sociology¹

Introduction and Overview

“...the problem about visual materials is that we have not found that minimal agreement which lets work proceed, which provides the guidelines we can observe and orient ourselves by as we produce and consume the products of a visual social science.” Howard Becker (2004:197)

“We should avail ourselves of all the techniques of expression ... literary techniques, where we teach people how to record, how to photograph, and how to use all these different media.” – Loïc Wacquant, quoted by Farrar (2010:29)

In this chapter I will propose that my photography can be seen as visual poetry in order to improve and enrich my understanding of productions of Singaporean Chineseness in weddings, and to provide a wider working framework in which photographs can be used in social research. I will argue that poetry does two things for Sociology in this thesis. One, it acts as a semi-autobiographical series of notes about my own experiences as a Chinese Singaporean (see *Chapter 4: Autobiographical Poetry and Participant Observation*). Two, it exposes the emotional aspect of interpersonal relationships in race and ethnicity-making in ways that normal text cannot. By using the metaphor of a poem and applying it to a photograph as a *visual* poem, I propose that a greater variety of sociologically interpretive layers can be evoked from a photograph.

Seeing a photograph as a visual poem solves two obstacles to using photography in social research – a lack of a sufficient and robust framework for reading photographs and a lack of aesthetic rigour in photographs presented. Visual poetry distinguishes itself from photography-as-text by espousing an aesthetic quality that creates an empathetic relationship between reader and subject, thereby immersing the reader in ways text alone cannot achieve. I will outline a set of guidelines on how photography as visual poetry can be read, and propose areas in which sociologists can improve the aesthetic quality of the photographs they take and present.

Seeing photography as visual poetry enriches my study into productions of Singaporean Chineseness in the following ways. One, it deepens my understanding of the places and spaces of Chinese Singaporeans by creating a photo-ethnographic space in which we can base our observations. It enriches our understanding of unfamiliar fields of study and situates us in a visually navigable context. If weddings are concentrated bursts of everyday life, then

¹ This chapter was first presented as a paper at the 2010 BSA Conference in Glasgow as “Photography and Poetry in Social Research”.

each photograph is a concentrated, detailed and layered understanding of a wedding. Two, photographs expose concealed relationships of intimacies and distances that individuals are unwilling or are unable to talk about. They transcend language barriers amongst informants whose first language is not English by interrogating their actions and interactions with other individuals and their material environments. In doing so, photographs show productions of ethnicity in ways that textual observations are unable to. Thirdly, photographs undermine the photographer's own judgements of taste and present a reflexive portrait that challenges the viewer to make her own decisions about individuals' ethnic tastes. The photograph thus acts as a visual audit to the researcher's interpretations and observations.

Finally, I will outline how I will use photographs and poetry in this thesis. I will rely on photographs to provide an immersive visual introduction to my field of study (chapter 6), to extend my observations of ethnicity-making in text-heavy chapters (chapter 7, 8 and 9) and to expose the emotional journeys and social sacrifices of Singaporean Chinese diasporic experiences (epilogue). Textual poetry will be used largely to annotate photographs in chapters 6 and my epilogue as a richer form of evocative captions and as a contextualising, semi-autobiographical tool.

Poetry as a Tool of Sociology

The first way that poetry can be used in Sociology is as another path into the lived experiences of a researcher. In chapter 4 (*Autobiographical Poetry and Participant Observation*) I highlighted how poetry could be seen as an autobiographical narrative (Alibhai-Brown 1997, Ang 2001) in race and ethnicity-making and how my own poetry acted as a set of semi-autobiographical notes. Throughout my research and in other parts of my life I have charted my own diasporic journey from Singapore to the United Kingdom in the form of poetry. I intend to use these poems *in conjunction* with photographs in chapter 6 and my epilogue as poetic captions, and will explain further at the end of this chapter when I discuss captions.

Poetry can also be applied to Sociology (and especially the Sociology of race and ethnicity) in a non-autobiographical manner. It does this in two important ways – one, it exposes the emotional texture of social relationships between individuals and between individuals and their environment. Two, it develops layers of meaning through manipulation of text and literary symbols that weave a more vivid tapestry of an ethnicised individual's everyday living spaces, both social and material. Poetry is especially suited to exposing the racialised and ethnicised social relationships that researchers observe and try to make sense of. It generates additional layers of meaning to relationships that normal text cannot, particularly that of an individual's emotions. These social relationships may be between individuals, or between an individual and objects or her material environment. Examples of such poetry in relation to race making

include *I, too Sing America* by Langston Hughes (in Stanford 1971:103) which vividly depicts the imbalanced relationship and living arrangement between Black servant and White master in the 1950s and *Telephone Conversation* by Wole Soyinka (see Nwoga 1980:173), which narrates a conversation between an African man pleading to rent a room from a White landlady. Both of these examples capture the raw emotion, frustration and *pathos* of the protagonist, giving us a deeper insight into the imbalances of power between racialised and ethnicised individuals.

The density and ambiguity of poetic text means that poetry can create more layered and richer accounts of a researcher's observations. Seemingly mundane objects can take on powerful and significant meanings, thus mapping the social, material and emotional landscapes of ethnic groups and individuals in ways other forms of text could not do. Consider the example of British poet Jackie Kay's poem *Crown and Country* (1998), who uses the metaphors of dentistry (teeth, caps, smiles) to expose social class, racial inequalities and commercialistic materialism in Great Britain. As Hácová puts it

“...the white British in Kay's poems have to resort to false teeth whereas the black people seem to enjoy perfect teeth. The dentures of the whites substitute the real teeth and, according to the poet, are as false as their artificial smiles...” (Hácová 2005:64)

Poetry can thus be a powerful tool to create Sociology by exposing social relationships and adding layers and weaving textures to social researchers' observations and interpretations. Poetry is able to do this because of its evocative nature, its manipulation of language, imagery and rhythm. It creates and suggests meaning deeper than the text it presents. It hosts a canon of literary devices that normal text struggles to contain like similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia and so on. We can leverage on poetry's strengths by applying its devices as a framework onto our data. I have done this by mapping literary devices *onto* photography. Before I explain how I did this, I will outline the difficulties in using photography in social research that led me to create a new methodological framework.

Obstacles to using Photographs in Social Research

Photography is an underutilised and oversimplified method in Sociology. It has often been accused of being either too ambiguous or not ambiguous enough (Knowles and Sweetman 2004). Photographs are also often treated as identical facsimiles of observations made by the photographer, to the point that they are perceived as an illustrative device supporting written text. As such, many sociologists find little benefit in using photographs. Despite scholars making strong cases for photography in social research (Twine 2006, Prosser 1998, Knowles and Sweetman 2004, Back 2004, Harper 1987), and proposing various useful ways to

understanding photographs (Becker 1998-1999), photography remains a relatively unpopular and underappreciated resource. Two problems underscore this current state – the lack of an accessible path into visual literacy for social researchers, and the lack of technical ability on the part of sociologists to fully maximise the potential of photographs as a core component of social research (Pink 2007:162).

I will address the first problem by creating a set of tools in which photographs can be read and appreciated in social research by casting the photograph as a *visual poem*. I will argue that seeing a photograph as a visual poem provides sociologists with a suitable metaphor and toolbox in which they can read and interpret photographs without encumbering themselves with an entire canon of art history and visual theory. I will address the second problem of technical expertise by using and presenting photographs in a manner that maximises and exceeds their descriptive and illustrative capacity. I will demonstrate that it is necessary for sociologists to improve their photographic abilities as much as their writing abilities if they wish to use photographs in their research. It is not good enough to accept a photograph “as is”, just as it is not good enough to accept a set of text “as is”.

Photography as Visual Poetry

Photography as a form of text that can be read and interpreted is not a new idea (Knowles and Sweetman 2004, Pink 2007). However, these allusions to text have only served to homogenise photographs as another form of text that can easily be replaced by other text. The reasoning is that if photographs are interpretive text, then interpretive text is just as good as photographs and removing photographs reduces methodological issues and complications in one’s research. I argue that photographs need to do things that text *cannot do*, such that they are not a dispensable or replaceable aspect of a sociologist’s work.

To do this, I propose that the photograph is recast and re-read as a *visual poem*² – a *meaning-laden and thickly-layered artefact that is interpreted on multiple levels, exposing a greater human condition than what it mundanely depicts*. Visual poetry is an *expressive* form of photography that is encoded in *realist-style* depictions of everyday life (Edwards 1997). Like poetry that mundanely depicts life (Heaney 1998) but belies a much deeper meaning, visual poetry is a framework that allows us to engage with seemingly realist-style photography in a deep, meaningful and ethnographic manner. Realist photography tends to document and illustrate, with the intention of showing a picture as a visual fact. Expressive photography on the other hand is more akin to other creative literary products. Although these categories have been seen to be complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Edwards 1997), they have not yet been reconciled into a coherent whole.

² Although some work has been done about the interface between poetry and photography (Szto and Furman 2005), little attention has been given to the idea of photographs *becoming* poetry.

My framework of visual poetry reconciles the problem of reading a realist-style photograph in an expressive way, granting further insights into images that *seem* one-dimensional and factual. This involves understanding a photograph as having certain *poetic* characteristics. There are four characteristics that we need to consider. One, visual poems are *cryptically descriptive* – mundane depictions of individuals, environments, objects, actions and images are coded into literary devices that expose the wider and more complicated circumstances that the photograph's subjects dwell in. One only needs to read Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation* (2003:670) to understand that the poet is not just talking about telephone booths and rental negotiations, but about the racial dynamics between black and white individuals in Apartheid-era South Africa. Two, they are *aesthetically evocative* – visual poems combine elements of light, composition, subject matter and context into an artefact that triggers both a rational *and* emotional response from the reader. Doing this creates a temporary sympathetic relationship with the reader, immersing the reader into the subject's circumstances and enriching the viewer's understanding of the message the photographer is trying to convey.

Three, they are *infinitely encoded* – readers of photographs will easily interpret them in ways never intended by the photographer, granting alternative and longitudinal insights into the field of study the photographer is portraying (Stoller 1997). In this way, the photograph is never simply about a straightforward depiction of social reality (Twine 2006), neither is it a single direct message of the photographer. It is also an opportunity for viewers, both present and future, to make up their own minds about what they see and about what they think they see. Finally, and this is unique to *visual* poems – they are *visually confrontational*. When presented with photographs readers are immediately treated to set of visual images. Unlike interpretive text or poetry, the reader is not left to derive a mental image from words. Rather, her first encounter is imposed by the photographer, and it is up to her to reinterpret the photograph as she sees fit. In other words, visual poetry *demand*s a visual encounter from the moment it is read, and because of this is eminently suited as a method for approaching visual matters like ethnic taste.

How to Read and Write Visual Poetry: My Visual Practice

Seeing photography as visual poetry provides us with a tried and tested framework in which we can achieve visual literacy without encumbering ourselves with a new canon of visual theory³. I argue that this can be done by drawing upon the tools scholars use when analysing

³ I am not arguing that visual theory is redundant or not useful – I have made several references to proponents of visual theory in this chapter (Sontag 2003, Clarke 1997) which have enriched my own practice and my understanding of photography in social research. What I am arguing for is a robust framework that is accessible to a wider group of social researchers who wish to incorporate

textual poetry and applying it to visual poetry. The contemporary poem is usually a short series of verses that do not necessarily rhyme. The poem often contains a variety of literary devices in the form of similes, metaphors, personification, alliteration, onomatopoeia and couplets. Poetry can be cathartic, a simple expression of the poet's emotions. It can be political, written as a way of subverting established authority or speaking out for marginalised individuals or groups. It can simply be descriptive, a way for a poet to capture scenes in front of herself as a way of remembering. It can be any one of these things or all of these things. A visual poem contains the same literary devices that one might expect to find in a textual poem. People, scenes and artefacts are described and depicted in the photographer's aesthetic vision / style, like how Paul Strand (1915, see Golden 2008:242-243) portrayed his subjects in *Wall Street, New York*. There is often a message, an opinion or a theme embedded in poetry, and likewise, one has to look for the messages, opinions and themes in the photograph.

Scholars have regularly compared photography to poetry, but these connections tend to be fleeting or superficial. For example, Morris (2003) notes how poets like Walt Whitman and Rainer Maria Rilke see and write things very much in the same way that photographers take pictures, but his connections between photography and poetry ends there. Clarke's (1997) treatment of Alfred Stieglitz's photos *Dancing Trees* (1921) and *Music* (1922) also allude to these photographs as "mood poems" (1997:170), but he stops short at analysing the photograph in a poetic context. A social researcher who wishes to read photographs as visual poetry could thus ask the following questions when analysing photographs.

- What are the literary devices used and how effective are they? What do the items in the photograph mean – people, objects, environment, etc?
- What is the photographer trying to say?
- In what context is the photograph being taken and what how is the photograph engaging with that context?
- Is the photographer criticising, challenging, describing, supporting or simply creating a unique view of the human condition?
- What is the wider issue at stake here?
- What is the effect of the aesthetic quality of the photograph?

The aesthetic quality of the visual poem is especially important because it is what distinguishes photography from text, making the two complementary but mutually exclusive. The problem remains as to *how* that aesthetic quality is achieved. It is true that all photographs have ethnographic value (Pink 2007), but some photographs have *more* value than others. This is similar to bodies of text that social researchers put so much effort into

photography into their work in a meaningful and efficient manner. My approach contributes to this bridge between mainstream social research and more abstract notions of photography.

crafting so that their ideas and observations are valid, interesting and useful. A photograph requires the same amount of care, attention and skill to maximise its potential for communication and evocation. Based on my own photographic practice, I argue that the researcher needs to take into account the following things to do this⁴.

A Relationship with Light. A researcher who works with a camera must also work with light – how it casts shadows, contrast, highlights and halos. How it can bring attention to parts of an image but at the same time conceal others. In my own practice, I have a dependent relationship with light – I rely on whatever light is available when the photograph is taken, and very rarely add my own unless it is absolutely necessary. This also involves not switching off /on ambient lights and not turning on my flashgun. Photographs produced as a result of this kind of relationship are often *chiaroscuro* in their presentation, heavily contrasted with pools of shadow and a sense of pensiveness. This style is informed by work of photographers such as André Kertész (see *Le Square Jolivet a Montparnasse* (1927) and *Chez Mondrian* (1926)); O. Winston Link (see *Washing J Class* (1955)) and Willy Ronis (see *La Columne de Juliet* especially (1957))⁵.

An understanding of Space and Environment. Photographs used in social research are often tightly cropped around a primary subject (see Pink 2007) and only occasionally take a subject's material environment into account (Harper, Knowles and Leonard 2005). Whilst these “tight” images are useful at times, they ignore the interactions that their primary subject is involved in. These photographs lack the contextualisation and active dwelling (Ingold 2000) that textures subject's circumstances. In my practice I often “demote” the primary subject's size to that of his, her or its surroundings. I choose to situate my subjects in their social and material spaces, thereby eschewing wordy descriptions for solid visual mappings.

Approaching the Subject from New Angles. New data can be created and re-created by approaching the subject from new angles – crouching, overhead and sideways are all potential ways to increase the aesthetic quality of a photograph. Alexander Rodchenko's *The New Moscow* (Tupitsyn et al 1998) is an excellent example of misplaced central subjects and awkward angles. It also encourages new ways of “seeing” the subject, both for the researcher as well as the viewer. In my practice I have to take into account that I am taller than the average Chinese Singaporean and my photographs will reflect that difference in height. As such, many photographs are taken from a kneeling or crouching position. The result is that

⁴ It is not possible to create a comprehensive guide to photography for sociologists given the constraints of this thesis. The areas I am highlighting are a response to what I see to be the most immediate challenges facing social researcher who already engage or wish to engage in photography as a qualitative method.

⁵ At the same time, the use of artificial light in documentary photography can have equally evocative effects – Martin Parr (see *Party* (1995)) is one very good example. To see this photograph and the others mentioned above, see Golden (2008)

both my camera and my subjects are repositioned in the photograph relative to their surroundings, granting me potentially new insights and observable actions.

Bending conventional rules of photography. Technical manuals and magazines on photography often adhere to a rigid set of rules that compose a “good photograph” – these include the rule of thirds, fill-in flash, perfect and consistent exposure and the reciprocal rule. These rules are important, because they teach one how light works and how one’s camera works under different conditions. However, it is up to us to bend these rules to make the photograph work for our respective studies. This involves taking into consideration the questions I posed about reading a photograph as a visual poem and then working backwards. The researcher becomes a visual poet, crafting the photograph in her head and at the same time taking the photograph. In my practice rules of composition become *guidelines*. What is more important is the message that I am composing and inscribing onto the photograph. My photographs tell a story, but also interrogate the social lives and realities of my subjects. At times this involves creating photographs that may not be conventionally “good”, but still evoke a strong reaction from my viewers.

Accepting post-processing for what it is. Post-processing, the act of editing a photograph after it is taken, is not a new phenomena having been accessible through the use of chemical darkrooms, but its importance and accessibility has increased greatly with the availability of digital darkrooms – editing a photograph on a computer using software like Adobe Photoshop or Paintshop Pro. In my practice, I used to rely on a professional lab or darkroom technician to change the aesthetic quality of my photographs. With a digital darkroom, I bring control of the aesthetic back into my own hands. The digital darkroom is my way of *extending* the process of photo-taking, such that it is not just about the moment that is captured, but a refinement of that moment over a longer and more pondered period of time.

Photography, Visual Poetry and Transdiasporic Ethnicity

Photography’s position in the study of race and ethnicity has been a contentious one. Photography has been used to subjugate, mobilise (Smith 2004) and celebrate individuals based on their race and ethnicity. During colonial times photography was a form of social othering and ordering of colonised people (Edwards 1992). Colonial photographs can be seen as a reflection of the ideologies and intentions of the colonial authorities, in which “power relations of the colonial situation were not only those of overt oppression, but also of insidious, unequal relationships which permeated all aspects of cultural confrontation” (Edwards 1992:4). By photographing ethnic groups and categorising them into an ordered (subjugated) structure, colonial authorities were able to justify their role as liberators of racialised savages (Knowles 2006). But photography is also a tool of social action. It can be used to engage with racial, ethnic and other social prejudices by creating awareness of

marginalised individuals. Although this has been well-documented in European and American academic literatures, less is known about photographers in Singapore, although this is now changing with the likes of photojournalist Samuel He who spent a month living with immigrant Indian labourers in Singapore and documenting their living conditions, exposing the racialised economic divides in contemporary Singaporean society⁶. Other photographers who have worked with similar individuals include Darren Soh (2001) and Jing Quek⁷.

Photography is a powerful way for us to understand productions of transdiasporic ethnicity. It is able to do this through three key processes – *Immersion*, *Revelation* and *Reflection*. Immersion involves the creation of a photo-ethnographic space that acts as an additional navigable map for researcher, viewer and subject alike. Revelation exposes hidden relationships and social intimacies and distances that informants are unwilling or unable to talk about. Reflection acts as visual audit for the findings of the researcher, creating a reflexive point between researcher, reader and subject. Readers are challenged to interpret ethnic taste and productions of ethnicity for themselves. I will deal with each of these in turn.

Immersion draws upon visual poetry's ability to be *aesthetically evocative* and *visually confrontational*. Each photograph becomes a *concentrated instance of ethnicity-making in transdiasporic space*. If the wedding is a microcosm of transdiasporic space, the photograph is an instanced microcosm of the wedding, albeit one that is open to interpretation to whoever reads it. A photograph creates ethnographic space in three dimensions – height, width and depth. A sequence of photographs can also create space through a fourth dimension of time. The dimensionality of these photographs mean that the space created is multiply layered both in its depictions as well as its meanings. One can look *into* the photograph as well as *around* the things that surround the photographer's subjects. The result is an immersion into a field of study, powerfully contextualising the ethnographer's findings.

A visual poem does more than just immerse the reader in transdiasporic space. It reveals the social intimacies and distances of my informants, as well as the directions that they are steering their social trajectories. This occurs in two ways. The first is a study of the symbolic interactions (Goffman 1969) between individuals in photographs. How they look at, touch, react to or interact with each other can betray unspoken intimacies and distances. *Non-interaction* is equally important. For example, photographs exposing loneliness in crowded situations like weddings can betray an individual's position both within her own family as well as in a wider social context. The second is a study into the juxtapositional and complementing material practices of my informants. This is not just about *what* individuals use in weddings, it is also about *how* they are used in relation to each other. The positioning, consumption, production and display of aesthetic markers expose the different ethnic lifestyles that

⁶ <http://www.panpa.org.au/Public/Template5/ThreadView.aspx?tid=27086>

⁷ <http://superhyperreal.com/test/SSgIdol.html>

individuals like, and conversely the non-use of markers exposes what they do not like. Much can be garnered when using photographs to analyse contrasting aesthetic markers that interact in close physical proximity, and will be the focal point of my understanding of ethnic taste changes in chapter 8. The third way is that photography transcends language barriers through a study of action and not discourse - this is especially pertinent in my field of study, where many first or second-generation Chinese Singaporeans speak little to no English or Mandarin, limiting my interaction with them. Photography allows me to investigate individuals' ethnic tastes and ethnic lifestyles as they *live* it, as they consume aesthetic markers and interact with different individuals.

Finally, the photograph is a reflexive tool that acts as a visual audit on my findings. It challenges conceptions of ethnic taste and judgements made by researcher, reader and subject, exposing the "contradictory" nature of the photograph (Berger and Mohr 1982). This is possible for two reasons. The first is because photographs conceal as much as they reveal. Not only is this because a photograph is *cryptically descriptive*, in that each item in the photograph can mean something more than what it mundane depicts, but also because we must constantly question what we *do not* see that is obscured by what we *do* see. These obstructions can be literal, such as the tight crop of a photograph zoomed in onto an object at the expense of its surroundings, or they can be implicit, such as a happy posed family portrait concealing family conflicts and drama (Twine 2006). The second is because the photograph is *infinitely encoded*, and the intentions of the photographer may not necessarily be read by the reader. The result of this is that photographs have the potential to both support *and* undermine claims made in a sociological / ethnographic study. But this also means that photographs allow us to take a reflexive turn on what the researcher has observed for herself. We as readers are thus given the opportunity to develop our own unique understanding of the field of study, and the researcher's responsibility is then to ensure that that opportunity exists.

How Photographs will be used in this Thesis

I will present photographs in two distinct ways in this thesis. The first is an embedding of individual photographs within textual chapters (chapters 7 to 9). The second is the use of *photo-collections* that embody my visual poetry framework. Photographs used within text will be intentionally less thick in their description and use of literary devices, as their placement in the thesis will involve a higher interaction with the text that they are embedded in. This does not mean that these photographs are present merely as illustrative tools. Rather, they will be arranged strategically to *extend* my textual observations and findings, and at the same time allow readers to reflect on the subject matter (aesthetic markers, relationships, rituals) that I am analysing.

The term “photo-collection” is a more apt way to describe sets of visual poems. Photo essays (Gold 1995, Harper 1994) imply that a series of photographs have a distinct plot line that runs linearly from start to finish, involving an introduction, body and conclusion. Although collections of poetry rely somewhat on a sequence, they are also meant to be read individually and *can* be appreciated randomly. There will be two photo-collections in this thesis. The first is a visual mapping of Singaporean Chineseness in chapter 6. The map is designed to do the following things. One, it is meant to introduce the reader to Singapore and the places where Singaporean Chineseness is made. This is a necessary and important step in this thesis because contemporary Chinese Singapore is a relatively understudied area in American and European sociological literature, and contemporary urban Singapore is an even less photographed location. The visual map immerses the reader and contextualises my observations of ethnic taste and ethnic lifestyles in later chapters. Two, the map creates a photo-ethnographic space that exposes the actions and interactions of my informants, and the social intimacies and distances that they are constantly making in everyday life. This is reflected in the way that they *dwell*, and the way they relate to other individuals and objects within each photograph.

The second photo-collection forms the epilogue, concludes the thesis and extends my findings into a study of loneliness and economic exclusions experienced by first and second-generation Chinese Singaporeans. It is about the real and lived ramifications of aesthetic dissonance (chapter 8) and connections between ethnic lifestyles and economic wealth (chapter 9). Differences in ethnic lifestyles and rapid economic expansion, coupled with state-led changes to language use in Singapore have meant that certain groups of individuals have found themselves excluded both socially and economically (Kong and Yeoh 2003, PuruShotam 1998). Their productions of ethnicity have, through political, historical, economic and social processes created social distances with exclusionary consequences. My photo-collection analyses their isolation in a highly consociate event like the wedding, exposing the ironies of their elevation in status as ritual figureheads of the household – cared for and loved by family but forgotten by the economy. I will also show how individuals who have left one home to forge another have now found themselves alien again.

Both photo-collections will use a “one-photograph-per-page” format, eschewing the use of photo-collages and montages (Goopy and Lloyd 2005). Collages are useful tools in creating visual maps and relating portraits of individuals to their wider social environment, they are also useful in showing how a scene may change over time as they are placed side by side. However, a major disadvantage to using photo-collages is that they can potentially detract from the aesthetic quality of the photograph. In my professional practice I have found that this is especially true, as photo-collages become a way for commercial wedding photographers to hide poorly composed photographs in a deluge of images. This means that the reader becomes overwhelmed by the sheer number of different images vying for her attention,

thereby decreasing each photograph's evocative potential. The main purpose of restricting myself to one photograph per page is to allow the reader to linger, reflect and analyse.

Photographic Captions and Poetry as Semi-Autobiographic Captions

Photographic captions have proven to be useful to social researchers and photographers when presenting images. But a caption can sometimes become too much of a description, compromising the revelatory power of a photograph. Scholars such as Stoller (1997), Coover (2004) and Barndt (1997) have avoided this by leveraging on text to draw out the expressive potential of their photographs. Barndt, for example, takes transcripts from interviews with her photographic subjects to juxtapose them next to their portraits. In this way individuals who had their photographs taken were able to write their own captions, creating an alternative view to that of the photographer. My use of captions have done the following things. One, captions are used to deepen readers' engagements with my photographs by contextualising their social, physical and cultural locations. Two, captions clarify awkward photographs where the initial image presented is overly abstract and the reader is left unclear as to what is the subject. They are meant as a lead-in into the photograph, enough so that the reader can interpret it in the light of the subject's circumstances. I have used two forms of captions – poetry that was written in conjunction with my photographic practice, and short phrases as captions-cum-titles. The latter is self-explanatory, but the former requires further clarification.

Using poetry as captions grants my study two important benefits. The first benefit stems from my poetry acting as a set of semi-autobiographical notes of my own diasporic experiences, journeys and memories. These notes weave a personalised emotional texture (Rose 2006) of ethnicity-making in my photographs. In doing so, my poetic captions generate a deeper, more immersive viewing experience of my photographs. Appendix 5A gives an example of such emotional texturing. The photograph and poem were created at two different points in time in two different situations. The photograph was taken by chance at Joann (27, Graphic designer) and Austin's (27, graphics designer) wedding. They had walked past a group of workers hired to perform maintenance work on Austin's apartment block.

The poem *Little India* was written several years earlier in response to the lived experiences of foreign workers in Singapore from India. I was waiting in a car for my mother to buy a takeaway, and we were parked near a central garbage disposal centre where wheelie bins were brought in from surrounding flats to be emptied. From my car I could hear sounds of cooking, showering and chatting. Later I saw several workers emerge from the disposal centre. Their everyday lives were interlinked with the rejected material lives of others. In the poem I took the voice of a worker, talking about the jokes people in Singapore make about me and the different way I do things. I wrote it in this way because I felt a sense of exclusion and marginalisation on the part of these workers, that even innocuous jokes about their skin

colour betrayed a feeling of superiority amongst Singaporeans, especially Chinese Singaporeans.

By linking *Little India* to the photograph of Joann I embedded the social situation of the wedding into the wider social landscape of Singapore. The opulence of Joann's tea dress, combined with the special-ness of the wedding contrasted with the everyday mundanity of the foreign workers painting the void deck. It reminds the reader that this is just one instance of something that happens all the time. I stress here that the poem did not evoke Joann's or Austin's (or anyone in the photo) feelings towards the workers. The poem and photographed were paired on a visual basis where they shared sympathetic themes.

The second benefit is that poetry can speak for the photographer without overstating the image. The ambiguity of poetry as text that *needs* to be interpreted means that I am able to transcend the problem of realist captions (Pink 2007), but at the same time avoid making my photographs inaccessible to the point that my message becomes vague and incommunicable. The reader is free to take up the mundane depictions of poetry, but is also able to engage with its hidden meanings and metaphors. In this way the reader becomes autonomous in her interaction with the photo-collection, free of the any over-riding interference from the researcher.

Appendix 5B gives a pertinent example of how this can work⁸. In a poem written about the changing face of Singapore's Chinatown, I lamented about how individual lives were being glossed over commercial tourist ventures aimed at creating a sanitised version of Chinese Singapore. The poem, written in 1998, was complemented by a photograph taken at a block of flats in Chinatown which has now been demolished. The photograph showed a simple urn with joss sticks, a common sight outside of Chinese households adhering to Taoist religious beliefs. If there had been no poem about Chinatown, the reader would not have known what context the urn was placed in. Conversely, the presence of the photograph enforced the "hidden" things being replaced in Chinatown, which have now begun to disappear from the visual landscape. Poem and photograph thus co-exist as supporting articles while still avoiding expressive, descriptive and ethnographic redundancies.

Poetry is used strategically in chapter 6 as signposts and waypoints in my visual mapping of transdiasporic spaces, and in my epilogue as counterpoints to the circumstances (both historical and present) of my subjects. In the same way I am using a one-photograph-per-page layout, I will also be juxtaposing each poem on its own page so as to interact with photographs both preceding and following it (in chapter 6). In my epilogue I will be splitting a single poem over 16 images to create a continuous flow from start to end, and will elaborate

⁸ First presented as part of a poetry/photography performance at the National Creative Writing Seminar (Creative Arts Programme) in Singapore in 2003.

on this further at the end of the thesis. Other photographs involve a simple caption introducing and contextualising the photograph, similar to Sutton's (2001) use of realist captions to describe a shopping experience (see Pink 2007), but with enough ambiguity to allow for interpretations from the reader.

Conclusion

Photography and poetry remain underutilised in sociological research. I have in this chapter, and will for the rest of this thesis demonstrate the efficacy of photography, poetry *and* photography as visual poetry as tools of Sociology that allow for a deeper understanding of the way individuals make transdiasporic ethnicity. Photography delivers a deeper understanding of my chosen field of study; it has created gateways to access and a medium of interaction between me and my informants. It generates an additional layer of sociological texture and understanding of race, ethnicity and the social spaces in which ethnicity-making occurs that text alone would struggle to accomplish. Likewise, seeing a photograph as a visual poem amplifies its efficacy, allowing me to add one more layer of self-reflexivity, emotion and autobiography to my data.

This chapter laid out the groundwork and methodological framework upon which photographs will be used in this thesis. It also mapped out suggestions on how to read my presented photographs, and what role they played in exposing productions of Singaporean Chineseness. In the next chapter, I will draw upon photography's ability to expose the material environments and everyday lives of Chinese Singaporeans as a way to introduce the reader to Chinese Singapore.

Chapter 6: A Visual Introduction to Singapore and Singaporean Chineseness

Introduction and Overview

In my 7 years of participant observation I found myself situated in two main locations – the homes of my informants and the hotels where their wedding banquets were held. In this chapter I will use my photography to introduce and immerse the reader into the everyday living spaces of Chinese Singaporeans. I will focus mostly on HDB (government) flats, owing to the large majority of Singaporeans (over 90% in the 1990s) who live in such buildings. This chapter is meant to contextualise the social spaces in which transdiasporic ethnicity is made and ground my observations in chapters 7 to 9 in physical places (Knowles 2003). This chapter visualises the ethnic tastes of Chinese Singaporeans, and in doing so makes the social intimacies and distances between individuals tangible and observable. It introduces the reader to the different economic and social parts of Chinese Singapore, using the wedding as a compass.

This chapter is divided into several layers of spatial intimacies and distances, from private to public. I have inverted the stereotypical photo story and begin with very personal and intimate material objects and spaces, and then allowed these spaces to build into macro-overview cityscapes. As the collection progresses, the photographs increase in physical size as well, acting as a metaphor for the widening material environment of aesthetic markers that swallow up the individual. Each photograph is captioned with either a clue as to what is going on in the photograph, a related “rule” in wedding rituals, or a poetic statement exposing the wider social and ethnic context the photograph is situated in. At the same time, the location and type of housing are noted in parenthesis “[]” – Appendix 6A acts as a glossary to housing types, while a cartographical map of the locations where each photograph was taken follows this text (see *Additional Contextual Notes* below).

In chapter 2 I argued that Singaporean Chineseness is made in the social intimacies and distances between individuals, and that individuals’ *ethnic* tastes regulate the degree of social intimacy or distance between themselves and/or other individuals’ lifestyles. In chapter 8 and 9 I will explore how ethnic tastes are shaped, influenced and used in weddings. As such, I will in this chapter focus on four ways in which ethnic tastes are made visible and tangible to the researcher – One, aesthetic markers in the form of artefacts and the material environments individuals dwell in. Two, more mundane material artefacts that are not always immediately identifiable as aesthetic markers pertaining to ethnic tastes but nonetheless contribute to the makeup of an individual’s everyday life. Three, the contrasting everyday actions of individuals as they live, which include occupational work and four, metaphors of economic wealth and

social status, mostly because of my focus on linkages between wealth and ethnicity in chapter 9.

The three interconnected sections of the photo collection are as follows. *Section 1 – Home* looks at the highly intimate spaces of individuals, from their bedrooms to living rooms to dining rooms. Interspersed within photographs of these rooms are more detailed portraits of aesthetic markers that are scattered around, painting a social dimension of an individual's habitat (Sixsmith 1986) and her ethnic tastes. The home and things in a home are an integral part of a Chinese Singaporean's ethnic lifestyle, "its fabric and the artefacts and objects it contains act as... material supports for a particular way of life" (Brindley 1999:39).

I will also show interior spatial contrasts between state-subsidised housing (HDB flats) and privately-owned landed property¹. These spaces are especially significant in my study because they are the blankest canvas upon which individuals inscribe their ethnic tastes. Everyday clothes that hang behind the door, posters and paintings, relics and souvenirs all dot this domestic home-scape. Such home-scapes are the building blocks upon which more aggregated lifestyles can be perceived.

Section 2 – Void Decks examines the semi-public, liminal spaces of individuals as they leave their rooms to lead their everyday lives. These are the corridors, lift landings and public spaces underneath flats (void decks). These are also the roads that lead out of houses and the carparks that dot the public housing estates. These spaces act as metaphors for transdiasporic ethnicity as a *journey*, and this especially so for those Chinese Singaporeans who make an everyday journey from heartland suburbia to business and shopping districts, almost as if mimicking the economically-driven diasporic journeys that their grandparents took. Singaporean Chinese weddings involve a great deal of movement, and the bride's journey is symptomatic of the everyday movements of other individuals. Her special processional mirrors the mundane steps she takes on any other day.

Section 3 – Cityscapes considers the wider material environment that individuals find themselves in. Aesthetic markers are apparent on both personal levels as well as institutionally imposed by political and commercial entities in the form of architecture and advertising. Singapore's landscape is a rapidly and continually changing entity – buildings are constantly being demolished and rebuilt, and conservation a sometimes highly political process (Kong and Yeoh 2003). As such, the cityscape of Singapore hides and exposes diasporic stories from Singapore's colonial past up to its nation-state present. It is an historical framework in which Chinese Singaporeans stage their everyday lives and shape their ethnic tastes.

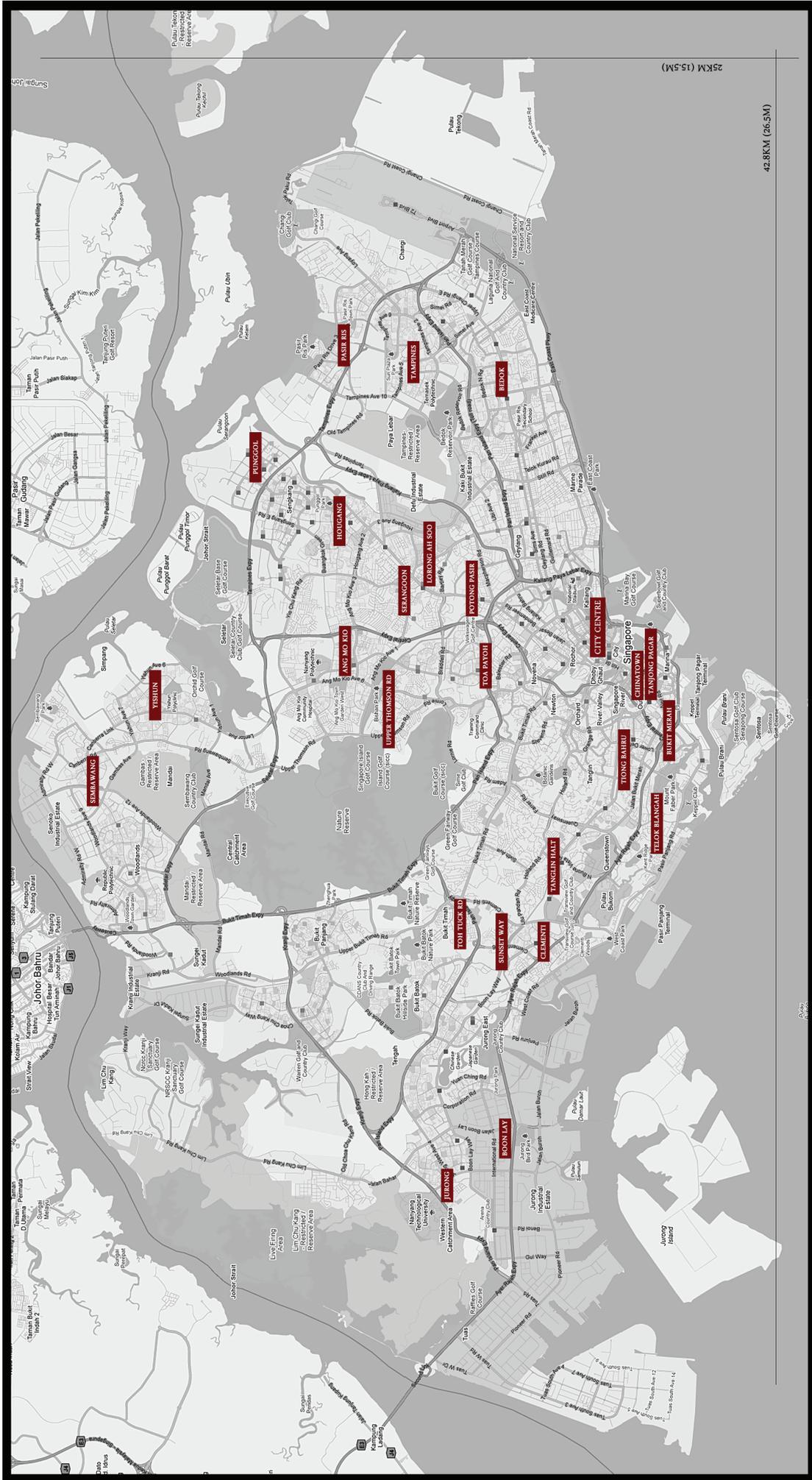
¹ See Appendix 6A for a glossary of neighbourhoods in Singapore

This photo collection is an expression of the different ethnic tastes and lifestyles that permeate the everyday lives of Chinese Singaporeans. It is meant to contextualise the rest of this thesis, making an unfamiliar field of study familiar, and allowing the reader to connect both ethnographically and emotionally with my informants. Following this photo-story I will present a chapter on how ethnic lifestyles and tastes are made known between individuals, and what kind of socially prominent ethnic lifestyles are most observable in weddings.

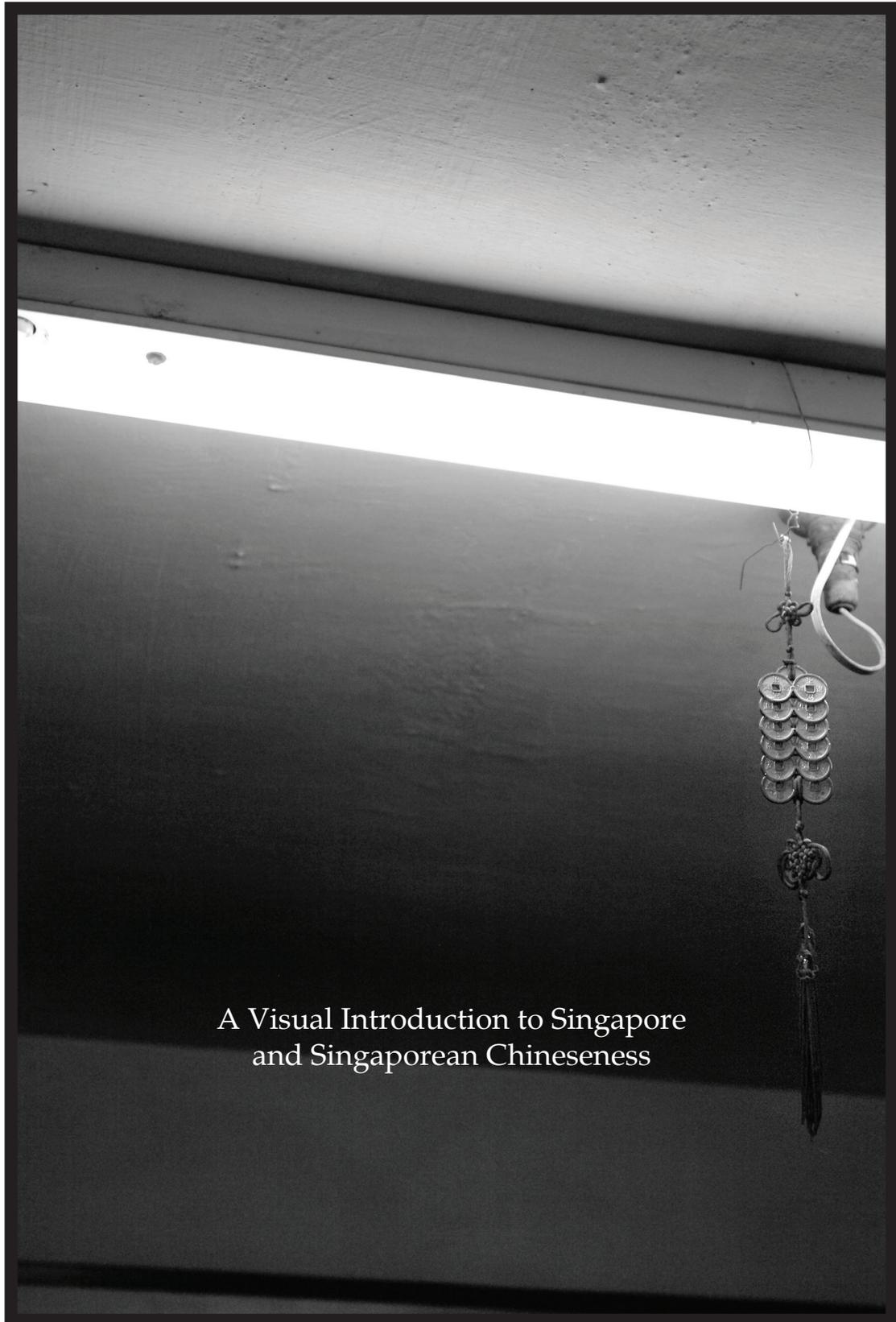
Additional Contextual Notes

- The majority of these photographs were taken in densely populated, mature housing estates in Singapore, owing to the fact that most family homes with adult children are located here
- These tend to be in the North, East and West of Singapore. Only in recent years has the state begun to develop far-north areas like Woodlands, Sengkang, Sembawang and Punggol. (Many new matrimonial homes built by the state agency, the Housing Development Board, are located in these areas)
- The city centre (Central Business District) is located in the South of Singapore and is marked on the map following this write-up
- Singapore is a geographically small nation-state, measuring approximately 42km in length and 26km in width
- Housing is generally very densely clustered, with most individuals living in high-rise, state-subsidised housing and a smaller percentage in either houses or private apartment (see Appendix 6A)
- I have placed a cartographical map of Singapore immediately following this text to give an idea of the geographic positions of the various locations which I have photographed.

Map of Singapore with Location Overlay



Map Source: Google Maps



A Visual Introduction to Singapore
and Singaporean Chineseness

Don't tell me about the Singapore Dream

This is what I fear most:

My wedding photos will be both Pre-Wedding and Actual Day, and I will preferably ride in an E-Class Mercedes-Benz, where I will taste the sour sweet bitter spicy humiliation when I fetch my wife. A wedding dinner, faux wedding cake, dry ice, wet champagne glass tower, and of course, some kind of speech appreciating my parents.

A 4/5 room HDB Flat. Decorated with wooden floors, neutral tones, many mirrors, and a plasma TV. The living room will have a couch with an extended lounge thingy for me to lie flat on.

A silver Toyota Corolla or Vios, or a black Mazda 3 – but not all at the same time.

My furniture will be from Ikea. They must be from Ikea. They must be from Ikea for me to be respectable. They must smell as if they are from Ikea.

My children will go to school one point nine nine kilometres from home.

They will learn that it is indeed about 3.1 grandchildren and approximately 1184 square feet of life.

Section 1 - Home



Ancestral Respects
[Jurong. Private Apartment]



"Luck"
[Jurong. Private Apartment]



Faiths
[Bedok. HDB]



Ensure Sticker on Every Orange
[Bedok. HDB]



Throw Away

They were called the Gods of
Health, Wealth and Prosperity. Everyone
had them in the house somewhere. House Gods.
Porcelain and painted, neither elevated
nor enchanted. I regarded them
like I regarded my toys, my shield
with Chinese dragons on them.

Then we changed our tone, and went to church.
And someone's friend from somewhere else
came along and said we could not have House Gods.
Or our pots with dragons painted on them.
Or my dragon shield.
Because the Bible said the dragon was Satan.

They said that the robot whose head became
another robot was evil. And we believed them.

And we believed them. And smashed
the pots and House Gods, and threw away
Satan on my Shield and my evil Headmaster robot.

One day i will get my robot back.



(No) Altars
[Clementi. Private Apartment]



Matrimonial Oil Lamps Lit by Battery.
[Tanglin Halt. HDB]



Envelope Me
[Bedok. HDB]



Pride of Place
[Clementi. Private Apartment]



Inscriptions
[Telok Blangah. HDB]



Jesus Loves You
[Jurong. Private Apartment]



Sisters
[Toh Tuck Road. HDB]



Importance
[Tiong Bahru. HDB]



Tiers
[Serangoon. Terraced House]



Hair Spray
[Chinatown. HDB]



Assurance
[Ang Mo Kio. HDB]



Hair Combing
[Toh Tuck Road. HDB]



Grandson(s)
[Punggol. HDB]



Prayers
[Pasir Ris. HDB]



Prayers II
[Yishun. HDB]



Prayers III
[Chinatown. HDB]



Ancestor Worship
[Boon Lay. HDB]



Ancestor Worship II
[Potong Pasir. HDB]



Bai Tian (Worship Heaven)
[Ang Mo Kio. HDB]

Balcony

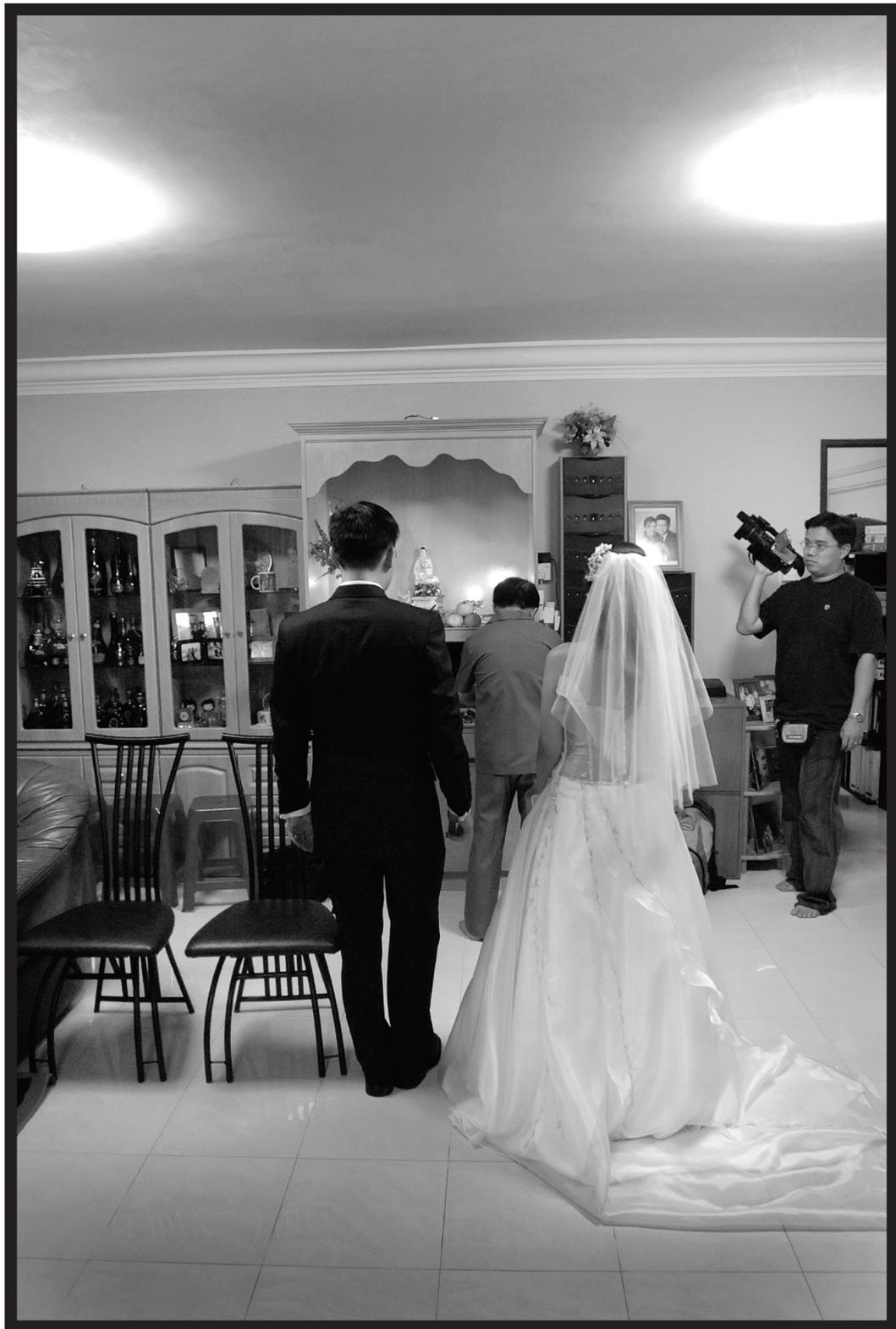
Ah Ma used to have a balcony before she moved.
It was large and concrete, with rolled up
bamboo curtains tied with pink plastic raffia string
taut against the rough surfaces
making wrinkles and winks.
They hung along the handlebars
I used to cling onto.

We would play every Chinese New Year.
My annual cousins. It was always
Hide-and-Seek, and it would always be the thin
cloth curtain blocking the cardboard boxes
we looked behind first.

On that balcony we would sit and have
reunion dinner. I always found the communal
soup bowl to be strange. Wasn't it unhygienic?
And why did *Ah Ma* only have a squat toilet?
I wasn't used to it.

She always told the same stories to my mother.
How my father got his name.
How my father was nearly sent to China
to be someone else's son, because they had none.
Ah Ma would sometimes try to
talk to me.

But she always forgot I didn't speak Teochew.



Bai Di (Worship Earth)
[Yishun. HDB]



Ancestor Blessings
[Tiong Bahru. HDB]



Adjustments
[Upper Thomson Road. HDB]



Interlude
[Yishun. HDB]



One Must Hide when the Bride and Groom Come Home
[Bukit Merah. HDB]

Section 2 - Void Decks



Waiting, Praying
[Telok Blangah. HDB]



Not All Flats Have Lifts on Their Level
[Bedok. HDB]



New Home
[Jurong. HDB]



Old Home
[Hougang. HDB]



Teochews must depart before the sun rises
[Hougang. HDB]



The Boy must wait for the groom as he arrives
[Sunset Way. Bungalow]



Everyone must be behind the grille before we lock it
[Telok Blangah. HDB]



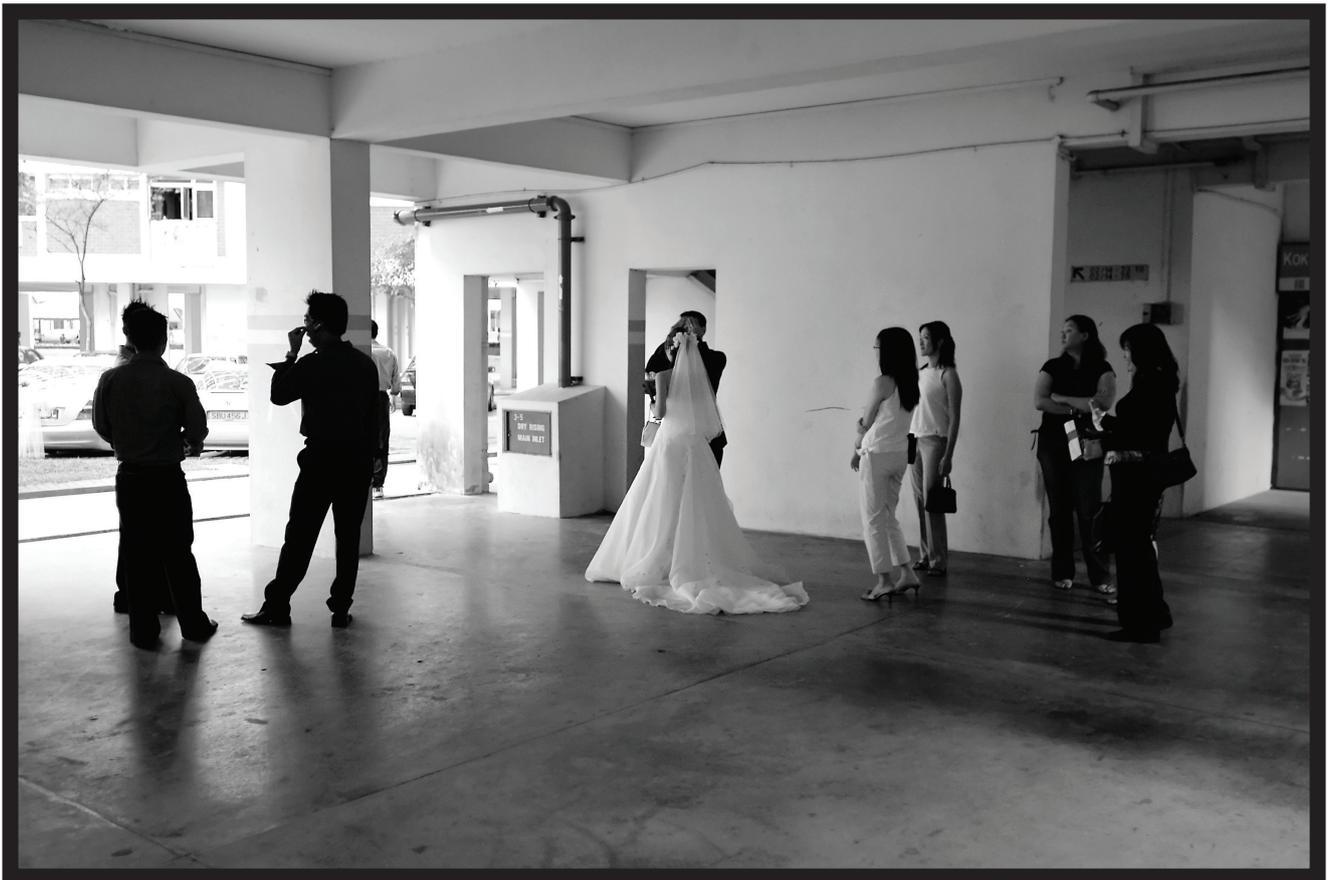
Morning Aftermath
[West of Singapore. Private Semi-Detached]



Substitute Home for a Chinese Mauritian Bride in Singapore
[Carlton Hotel]



Shelter
[Potong Pasir. HDB]



Void Decks are Multi-Use Venues
[Jurong West. HDB]



Video Diaries
[East of Singapore. Bungalow]

Little India

Forget me when I'm done with your palaces, the same way the architects were slaughtered to preserve the beauty of my country's landmark. Your noses shrivel and turn when you see me in my sarong, or when I hold the hand of my same-sex friend. You say it's hard to see me at night unless I smile.

So I smile, and remain fatalistic about crossing the street, just as I do at home. I will build your castles, and occasionally die for them. I will cook my food where you throw yours, and hold the hand of my same-sex friend. You know, where I come from, that's what friends do.



Weekday Weddings
[Lorong Ah Soo. HDB]



Attraction
[Tanjong Pagar. HDB]

Attraction

Tender blades of infant grass mingle at her toes.
Her lips like dew stained morning flowers
her laughter carried by the wind
herald fleeting fancy.
She passed me like every other,
and my wandering eyes stopped down
and followed in a gaze.

Feet follow eyes.
Where eyes look away the feet shuffle in
and step onto a nameless trail.
She is but beauty, and I know nothing else.
She remains silent in my mind.

Where fancy turns the heart is absent.
Only fancy lives for her.
For some other crouches in the corner
of my eye, and lies in my heart's chamber.



Attraction II
[Telok Blangah. HDB]

Section 3 - Cityscapes



Transit [Telok Blangah. HDB]



Returning Home [Bukit Merah. HDB]



Leaving Home [Toa Payoh. HDB]



New Home [Sembawang. HDB]



Not My Home [Jurong. HDB]

Postcards from Chinatown

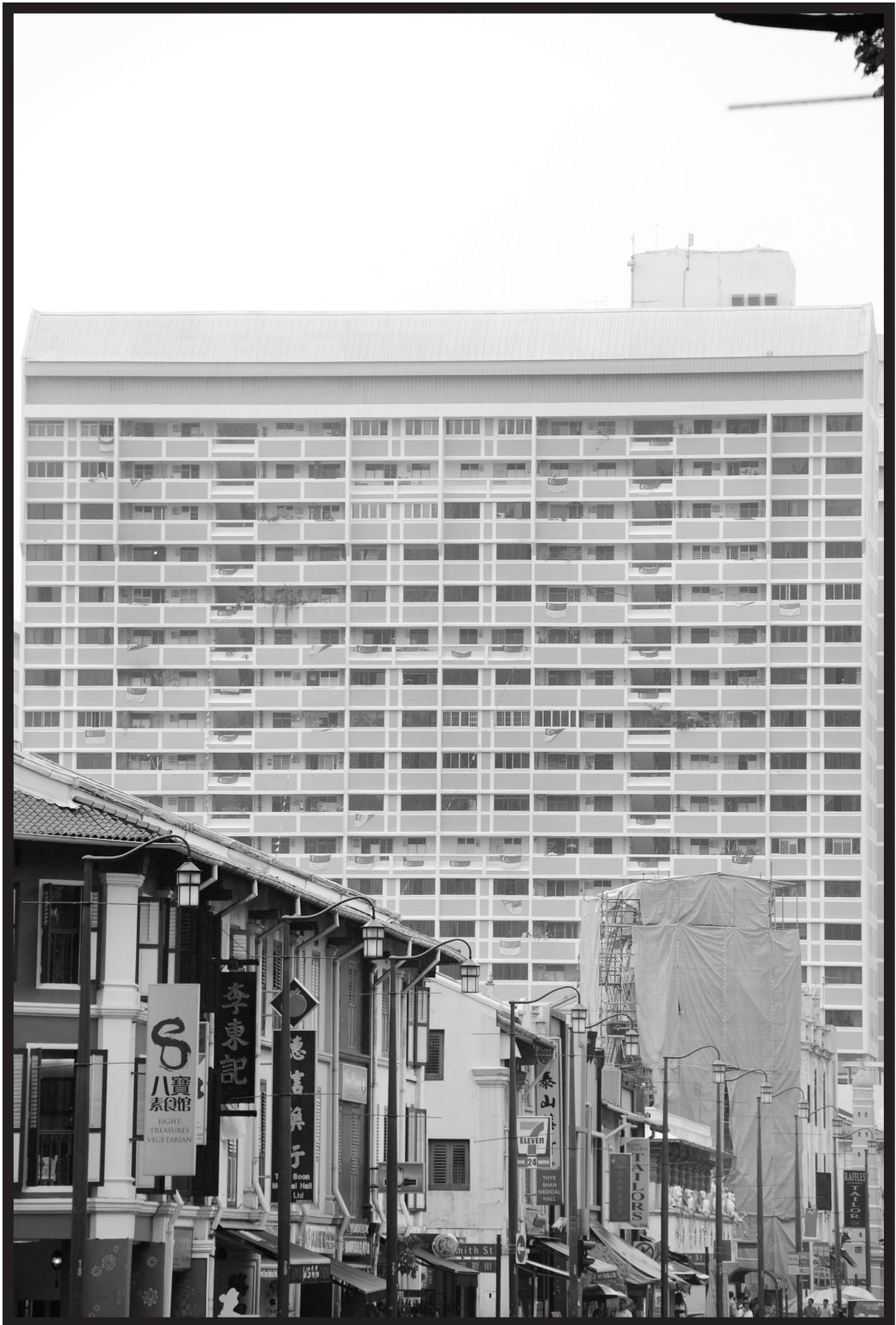
Racks of clothes along racks of clocks, as
if ticking away the fashion of the eras.
Fortune telling machine, I never
stepped on one before. Durian sign sale,
bicycle underneath a no-bicycle sign.
Rusty trishaw parked outside renovated
lifts. And an old dental surgery somewhere
next to an older barber in the HDB.
Urn, three joss sticks burnt out sometime ago.

That was the background where I walked,
background of the closed down emporium,
background of the foreign worker outside
an unopened shophouse. Background wet market,
background unanswered responses to the cajoling
from the hawkers in the background hawker centre.
Background, backstage.

Our performance dictates a different set of scripts.
Souvenir shops selling Chinese hats and fake
pigtailed stapled to the end.
Umbrellas for holding water.

Postcards of nothing we really do.

I'll sell this as distinctly local. Our whole stage of
rojak culture and the embracement of strolling
down the street back into the tourist bus. Shiny shiny
trishaws and fluorescent T-shirts peddle you around
the incorporated country. This is Singapore,
ladies and gentlemen, although you don't see
the locals anywhere.



Ex-Home [Tanjong Pagar/ Chinatown. Shophouses and HDB]



Something Old and Something New [Tanjong Pagar, Shophouses and HDB]

The rightmost flats are known as Duxton Pinnacle. They are the newest generation HDB flats, 50 storeys high with sky gardens and electronic passes

Home

It feels different, doesn't it? The air conditioning smells different, the trolleys move when you hold down the handle instead of letting go. The taxi driver who gabbles in that foreign tongue you thought you left forgotten in your AO level certificate.

It works like this – you say “ahhhhh, I want one fillet-o-fish value meal.” you do not say, “one fillet-o-fish value meal, please”, because you will sound atas. No, you don't want that, you don't want to be a potato eater. You miss your chicken rice, your laksa, stingray melting on your tongue. You miss the swearing in that foreign gibberish at football matches and IPPT.

It stays with you, squats at the back of your mind scratching itself. Reminds you that they are the red haired ghosts, the foreign devils (you called them that over there as well). It is classless, indeterminate, symbiotic.

And you miss it all. You really do.

Chapter 7: Taste Performances: Making Ethnic Lifestyles Interactive

Introduction and Overview

In order to understand how taste is shaped (and hence how ethnicity is produced) it is important to understand how it is activated and made tangible between individuals. This chapter lays out the tools that individuals use to project their ethnic tastes and lifestyles. I will show that individuals make their ethnic tastes and lifestyles known to others through *taste performances*. I will argue that taste performances are *explicit and outward-facing, special and /or mundane, and interactive*. In weddings, taste performances are achieved through insignias (including dress), architecture, actions (including rituals) and possessions. I will argue that taste performances are *ambiguous* in their interaction, and how an individual interprets or reacts to any given performance is dependent on their social relationship with the performer, their own ethnic tastes and the material and social landscape in which the performance is taking place.

Engaging in and reacting to taste performances also reflect the ethnic tastes and lifestyles of individuals. In Singaporean Chinese weddings, two socially prominent ethnic lifestyles are highly observable. These lifestyles are held in a socio-economic tension with each other, such that when they are compared and contrasted between individuals in everyday life *through taste performances*, social intimacies and distances are created. Two processes in weddings highlight how these socially prominent ethnic lifestyles work in my informants' lives – the first is aesthetic dissonance, which I will cover in Chapter 8 and the second is commercialised processes of ethnicity, which I will cover in Chapter 9.

Taste performances and their Characteristics

Taste performances are defined as *an individual's outward-facing sets of practices and actions that expose and express her ethnic tastes and/or lifestyles to other individuals*, resulting in the steering of her social trajectories, producing ethnicity in social intimacies and distances. Taste performances are an important way in which individuals negotiate their ethnic tastes with each other. It is by viewing and engaging with other performances that they are able to shape their tastes and social trajectories. Taste performances have three important characteristics – they are *explicit and outward-facing*, they are *special and mundane* and they are *interactive*. I will deal with each of these three in turn.

Taste performances are explicit and outward-facing

A key characteristic of taste performances are that they are ways of making ethnic tastes known to others. In everyday life the most obvious of these performances are ethnic parades and festivals like Chinese New Year or *Qing Ming* (annual grave cleaning). During my childhood, my parents often told me that it was “because we are Chinese” that we would celebrate Chinese New Year, eat mooncakes during the mid-autumn festival or wear sackcloth patches on our sleeves when a family member died. At my grandfather’s funeral when I was 4, all family members were made to walk over a portable bridge, throwing coins over the bridge into a makeshift pool of water meant to represent a river. When asked why we did this, the primary reason was that our family were Teochews (a Chinese dialect group, see Freedman 1957) and this was what Teochews did.

In Singaporean Chinese weddings taste performances are most readily observable in rituals. Amelia (24, Graphics Designer) and Jim’s (26, Interactive Designer) wedding in December 2004 was an exceptionally detailed and ritualised event by any standard. Both informants lived in 3-room HDB flats and belonged to working class families, although they held professional jobs. They conversed mostly in Mandarin or dialects with their parents and their extended family. Their parents had requested the presence of Suan (63, Retired), a *sang ke’um*, an older woman who specialised in wedding rituals and guided the bride through the wedding ceremony. When Amelia was leaving her home to Jim’s home for the tea ceremony, Suan opened up a red umbrella to protect Amelia’s head at the carpark, then proceeded to shower the couple with a scattering of dried dates, seeds and fruit, ignoring Singapore’s strict non-littering policy. When Amelia got into the car, Suan gave her a fan, and instructed her to throw the fan out of the car’s window as she departed, while at the same time not looking back.



Above: An Indian neighbour and his maid watch the wedding procession in the background as Suan sprinkles “blessings” onto Amelia

Suan’s actions and choice of ritual were highly public and visible. The red umbrella was opened outdoors, and the seed shower was done *in transit*. The event and actions of Suan were visible to anyone who walked past and to the multitudes of neighbours who could look down from their kitchen windows. Because she acted on behalf of Amelia’s parents, Suan’s performance exposed not just her tastes (I was later informed that her role was unpaid and voluntary) but the tastes of her “clients”. By using the red umbrella and dried seeds and fruit in public, Suan was making her tastes explicit to the people around her, both friends, family and strangers. Her discourse had become action, and her preferences had become visible and tangible in these aesthetic markers.

Taste performances are special and /or mundane

While rituals are the most obvious forms of performance, taste performances do occur at all levels and in very mundane situations. Suan’s performances above were scripted, calculated and executed with the experience of one who had performed the ritual many times. They were also far from mundane and restricted to specific moments in a wedding. Such performances could be seen as “special”.

However, other performances can be more subtle, but are no less explicit and outward-facing. Such performances are often found in the comportment of individuals (Knowles 2003) and the aesthetic of their dwelling places (Ingold 2000) and tend to be located in the mundane practices of everyday life. One pertinent example is the doors and doorways of my informants’ homes. These are the transitional and liminal spaces between the outward-facing public life of

an individual and her inward-facing domestic interior. It is in these spaces that public and private blend and overstep their boundaries.

Door decorations and artefacts surrounding doorways expose subtle yet outward taste performances. They are both public and personal. This is especially so in HDB flats where high-density residential blocks of flats mean that entrances to homes are often closely spaced to each other. Rows upon rows of doors line long corridors stacked upon each other. Many doors wear the insignias of their owners, ranging from simple Crucifixes to portraits of Hindu Deities. Amongst Chinese Singaporeans who espouse Taoist or Buddhist beliefs, doorways and corridor ledges hold small altars and urns to affix joss (incense) sticks, and doors are often affixed with talismans.



Above: During their wedding , Joann and Austin pay respects to Heaven and their ancestors outside Joann's home

Joann (27, Lecturer) married Austin (27, Lecturer) in 2004. Joann resides in a 4-room HDB flat in the north of Singapore. Her family and extended family tend to converse in either Mandarin or Hokkien. Her home's door and immediate surrounding corridor were adorned with religious and cultural artefacts. Along with urns and an altar, there was also a tray to offer wine and oranges to the family's ancestors. The urn was conspicuous in both its visibility and scent, the incense sticks creating a thin veil of smoke that hovered in the corridor and wafted out towards the next block of flats. The number of used incense sticks peering out of the urn suggested that offering incense to ancestors and Heaven was a regular occurrence at this household.

The presence of an urn, altar and food offerings give visual clues to Joann's family's ethnic lifestyles. They suggest a Taoist or Buddhist religion that involves ancestor worship (Tan 2001), and cultural forms that were imported (Gilroy 1991) from China through diasporic journeys by their immigrant ancestors. Without even entering her house or meeting its inhabitants, it is possible to derive some idea of the possible social and economic backgrounds, religious belief systems and

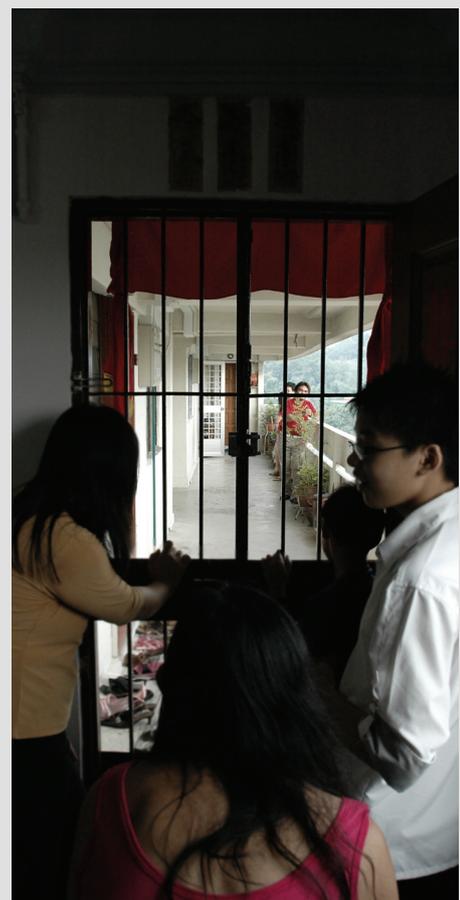
preferences of aesthetic markers of Joann's family members.

Taste performances are Interactive

Whether it is observing Suan's actions or walking past Joann's door / corridor, one *interacts* with taste performances presented to him or her. These presentations are not necessarily directed at any particular individual - Amelia's neighbour for example was simply passing-by when Suan began her performance. But because he was there, he indirectly participated by standing and observing the ritual. Interaction can occur at many levels, from simple observation and watching to actual participation and dialogue with another individual.

The wedding creates several moments of *public* interaction and voyeurism, especially when the bridal party moves between locations. One part of this journey begins early in the morning when the groom arrives to fetch the bride from her family home. Winnie (24, Administrative Assistant) and Yan Ming (25, Profession Unknown) were married in 2005. I was positioned at the ground floor of Winnie's block of flats to anticipate Yan Ming's arrival. As a procession of cars pulled up at the open-air ground floor carpark, the drivers sounded their car horns in a cacophony of noise, emulating the noisy bridal processional trumpets and cymbals in 1960s Singapore (Freedman 1957). The sounds of the car horns permeated the quiet trapezium of high-rise flats that bordered the car park, reaching Winnie's flat on the 10th floor and exciting her family members and bridesmaids who realised that the wedding was about to begin.

Yan Ming's noisy performance drew more than just his bride's attention. Winnie's neighbours and those in the surrounding blocks of flats could be seen peering out of their bedroom and kitchen windows. Most appeared to know what the noise signalled, and spent about 10 minutes watching the bridal party assemble. Some even left their own flats to get a better view of the proceedings. These individuals formed part of a larger sphere of public interaction in the wedding. Their voyeurism contributed to the wedding as a public spectacle, creating a social stage on which the bridal party were able to display their taste performances.



Above: Winnie's neighbours stay around to watch the wedding

Some taste performances are more intimate and personal but no less interactive. Ruth (26, Civil Servant) and Hian Lee (28, Lecturer) were married in 2006. Ruth belonged to a professional English speaking family and they lived in a private apartment in the West of Singapore. Like most brides I photographed, Ruth began her day having her make-up put on by a professional in her bedroom. Ruth's bridesmaids – Linda (27), Shereen (25) and Cindy (26) arrived at her home one by one and walked into her bedroom to greet her. At the same time they enquired about her wedding gown – her insignia as a bride for the day. Each bridesmaid spent time finding out about the gown, where it was bought, how much it cost and what the gown's design philosophy was based on (strapless, lace, bustier, can-can, etc). Ruth later hung her gown on a peg suspended from a tall cupboard, making the gown almost relic-like in its placement. At other weddings I photographed, friends and family members of the bride would also take time to engage with the gown, touching and feeling the material, remarking at its beauty, and praising the bride's own beauty when she wore it.



Above: Wedding gowns are an important aspect of a bride's comportment, and act as a point of personal interaction between the bride, her friends, family and passers-by.

Interaction is important because it signals that an individual's performance of taste has been noticed and received by another individual. But what one does with a received performance is another thing. Taste performances are also *ambiguous*, they tend to be received and interpreted by different individuals in different ways. In the next section, I will discuss the implications of ambiguous interpretations of individuals' taste performances.

Taste Performances have Ambiguous Responses

Whether a performance of taste is public or private, special or mundane, it remains interactive and outward-facing. Other individuals in visual and sensory proximity to a performance can and do receive, observe and interpret these performances. I argue that taste performances are ambiguous in their reception and interpretation. A performance is ambiguous when it changes according to who views, engages with or is confronted by it. Ambiguity creates a sense of visual and aesthetic confrontation between individuals on an everyday basis because each individual sees performances in a different light and from a different angle. In some instances the performance might be well-received and in other situations it might be misunderstood, rejected or even cause offence.

The different reactions non-participants have to certain noisy wedding rituals is a good example of how ambiguous taste performances might be. Door games form a significant part of the morning wedding ceremony (Wanyan 2008), where a groom and his groomsmen must perform forfeits in order to enter the bride's house to fetch her. The gate is locked and will only be unlocked by the bridesmaids once they are satisfied that the forfeits have been performed appropriately. Some of these forfeits include doing physical feats, singing, dancing, and eating foods with extreme tastes to get a grimacing reaction and other forms of ritual humiliation.

The games are always good-natured, but they are also very public and very noisy. They are conducted at the doors and corridors of households, and sometimes in more public places. Grooms like In Loong (26, Engineer) and Lim Huat (24, Engineer) were made to stand in a field at the ground floor and shout professions of love to their brides' flats several storeys up. Like the car-horning ritual in Winnie and Yan Ming's wedding, these activities caught the attention of several neighbours who peered out their windows and doors. Their reactions to door games were similar to car-horns – either passive observation or a warm acknowledgement that a wedding (considered an auspicious occasion) was occurring in their neighbourhood. In the over 60 weddings I photographed in densely-packed HDB flats, no neighbour has opened their door to tell the bridal party to quieten down.



Above: A bridesmaid 9 floors up directs In Loong and his groomsmen to perform a forfeit

My experience with the wedding of Sonia (29, Architect) and Kian Wee (31, Architect) in 2005 was very different. Sonia is a Chinese Mauritian, meaning that her family had no physical dwellings to call “home” in Singapore that Kian Wee could visit to fetch her. Instead, they settled for a hotel room to substitute as a “home”. The corridor of the hotel and door of the hotel room substituted as the gate by Kian Wee had to pass in order to reach his bride. As part of the door games Kian Wee had to haggle with Sonia’s bridesmaids over a sum of money that would let him through the door. In the narrow confines of the hotel corridor, the performance of door games became amplified. The door of the room next to Sonia’s creaked open and an upset male voice chided the bridal party for making too much noise. Kian Wee apologised and the door games carried on in a much more subdued manner.

Kian Wee’s experience shows how ambiguous individuals’ reactions can be to different taste performances. Ambiguous taste performances have two very important implications for this study. The first is a warning for researchers as to how to interpret performances, as performances are complicated and the way we interpret them may be very different from the way the performer or other individuals interpret them.

The second is that the different ways individuals interpret performances means that a visual confrontation of aesthetic markers is always a possibility, regardless of how one particular individual views the performance. As Whincup (2004:84) points out, “the constructor constructs but, equally, is constructed by the constructions.” A seemingly innocuous shopfront

selling items associated with ethnic minorities could very well be viewed as an encroachment of space onto a neighbourhood (Eade 1997). In other words, there is always someone who can and will feel threatened, challenged or confronted by another's use of aesthetic markers, just as there will always be someone else who will appreciate, accept or celebrate the same performance. In chapter 8, I will show that such ambiguity can result in *aesthetic dissonance*; the first of two processes that I argue affects an individual's ethnic taste, resulting in changes to social trajectories. However, in order to understand the different reactions and interpretations individuals have to taste performances, it is important to first understand the different contrasting ethnic lifestyles that are available to Chinese Singaporeans and most observable in weddings.

A Snapshot of Socially Prominent Ethnic Lifestyles

Two aggregated ethnic lifestyles exist and are readily observable in weddings and more mundane everyday life¹. The first embraces sets of ethnic identifications drawn from a different transdiasporic space largely involving North American and European notions of romance, consumption, wealth and religion. I propose that this lifestyle be called a "cosmopolitan" lifestyle, alluding to the globalised cultural forms that characterise it². The second embraces "traditional" forms of Chineseness that allude to diasporic and historical links with China. I propose that this lifestyle be called a "heartlander" lifestyle, referring to the heartlands of Singapore and the sprawling high-rise blocks of flat this study is deeply based in.

"Cosmopolitan" Lifestyles

"Cosmopolitan" lifestyles suggest a widely-cast, widely drawn-from transdiasporic space, often attributing sources to include the "West" – in this case mostly North America and Western Europe. Individuals who direct their trajectories towards such lifestyles have a tendency to embrace identifications and aesthetic markers more commonly associated with

¹ Whilst there are as many directions and trends as there are diasporic individuals, it is these two lifestyles that have contributed the most to the social, political and economic realities of Chinese Singaporeans, and have been shown to have the greatest impact on their lives (Ang 2001, Chua 2003, Kong and Yeoh 2003, PuruShotam 1998). This is evidenced in the cultural forms they consume, the taste performances they enact in weddings, and the narratives they build in conversation and in interviews.

² "Heartlander" and "Cosmopolitan" are derived from the Singaporean state's political discourse, which has now also become part of the popular discourse in everyday life and the media. In a national day rally speech, then-Prime Minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong compared the growing income divide to differences in ethnic lifestyles (Chua 2003). Two categories were highlighted – "cosmopolitan", referring to English-speaking, "Western"-educated, white collar Singaporeans, and "heartlander", referring to Mandarin/Dialect-speaking, Chinese-educated, blue collar Singaporeans. The demarcation was overly blunt; relying on language use, consumption patterns, housing types and income, but it struck a chord amongst Singaporeans, who appropriated the two categories into their everyday lives. Instead of closing the gap by identifying it, the state unfortunately linked different kinds of Singaporean Chineseness to rigid structures of economic wealth.

the “West”. “Cosmopolitan” ethnic lifestyles are often connected to better education, better housing, higher salaries, better life opportunities and a global-connectedness that suggests a worldly, dynamic selfhood. Pre-wedding photography in locations like Paris, Las Vegas and Venice is a pertinent example of such trajectories (I will expand on this in chapter 9), but such performances occur regularly and mundanely as well, in one’s home décor, food consumption patterns and dress sense. In a wedding, the use of the colour white is the most obvious and contrasting aesthetic marker of “cosmopolitan” ethnic lifestyles. This is made tangible in the use of white wedding gowns.

Earlier in this chapter I noted how white gowns as the primary form of dress amongst Singaporean Chinese brides was also a way to project their selfhood (Gell 1998). Brides like Ruth, Ellysha and others all chose to use the white gown as an insignia of their status as a bride (as opposed to the *kua* or other forms of wedding dress). The white wedding gown is commonly associated with white “Western” weddings (Mcbride-Mellenger 1993) and scholars have linked the popularity of the white gown across the world to the wedding of Queen Victoria in 1840 (Winge and Eicher 2003). The white wedding gown has become the *de facto* primary outfit for the Chinese Singaporean bride. In choosing her gown, the bride often consults marketing material like bridal magazines and websites, and ultimately her choice lies in procuring an item that fits into her own notions of romance, fashion and weddings. In my interview with Charlotte (29, Management Consultant), she mused about the connection between gown and romantic fantasy,

“...When we grow up, the idea of a wedding as a little girl is a white wedding gown and a veil, it’s not of a Chinese *kua*, and we get that idea from TV, movies, books – a Westernised notion of what is a *romantic* wedding.’ Charlotte

Charlotte is a rare Chinese Singaporean who can speak both English and Mandarin fluently. Her family is economically well-off and she studied law in university before moving into consulting. Her consumption habits of branded European clothes, bag and car appear to lean towards a “cosmopolitan” lifestyle. Wearing a white wedding gown became a performance of her everyday “cosmopolitan” tastes. In donning it, Charlotte appeared to fulfil ambitions set out from her childhood through to her adulthood. She has consumed notions of a wedding put forth to her by various sources of literature (fairy tales), media (celebrity weddings) and advertising (bridal magazines). To wear such a gown is to at least temporarily engage in a lifestyle of fairy-tale castles, Hollywood glamour and a globally-assured selfhood.

White weddings in Singapore epitomise the conspicuous consumption (Grimes 2000, Mead 2007, Otnes and Pleck 2003) that have been noted in weddings by other scholars. Brides who wish to engage fully in a “Cinderella wedding” in Singapore are liable to ever-increasing costs, incurred by purchasing the gown, photography, banquet hall rental, wedding planner

services and so on. Even smaller weddings carry echoes of Veblen's (2005) social emulation – at my own wedding in 2009 I chose to limit my guests to a handful of relatives and friends. My wife and I did away with wedding favours, choosing to give the money to charity. We rejected any form of wedding packages the hotel offered, and bought our clothes from discount off-the-rack factory outlets and online. But our wedding function room still emulated a chapel (we asked my pastor bless the marriage in a hotel) – with a centre aisle, a raised “stage” and a ceremony that mirrored that of a church service. Our costs were still not insignificant, and we still could not fully escape all the commercialisation and conspicuous consumptions that characterise contemporary Singaporean Chinese weddings.



Above: My own wedding in 2009 (Photo Credit: Tay Ling)

Taste performances alluding to these “cosmopolitan” lifestyles of “Western”-oriented-transdiasporic space and ethnic identifications thus become intertwined with notions of wealth and the economic ability to engage in conspicuous consumption. That weddings are events of conspicuous consumption is not new (Bloch, Rao, Desai 2001), that they help build ethnicity through conspicuous consumption is rarely acknowledged. In chapter 9 I will consider how commercial activities encourage social emulation (Veblen 2005) and a steering of social trajectories towards “cosmopolitan” forms of ethnic lifestyles.

“Heartlander” Lifestyles

Other ethnic lifestyles that contrast against “cosmopolitan” lifestyles become by a process of elimination associated with lower levels of economic wealth. “Heartlander” lifestyles contrast

deeply with “cosmopolitan” lifestyles. Their continued existence and embracement is an apparent form of social and political glocalisation (Cohen 1997, Hall 1991) in response to the popularity of “Western” media and consumption patterns. “Heartlander” lifestyles allude to ethnic archetypes and stereotypical links between “new home” and “homeland”. These lifestyles involve ethnic identifications imported and modified from China but still perpetuated as distinctly Chinese. They are often practiced as highly visible performances, and individuals steer their trajectories towards these lifestyles are often first or second-generation Chinese Singaporeans who made an actual migratory journey. At the same time many of these individuals do not speak English, are (relatively) poorly-educated, work blue-collar jobs and often treat “Western” practices with a degree of suspicion. Millie (28, Teacher), whom I interviewed in 2009, mentioned how her mother continuously referred to “Western” practices (eschewing Dialects/Mandarin for English, eating non-Chinese food, sexual promiscuity) as *xi fang de wai feng*, which directly translates into “from the West blows a skewed wind”, implying a sense of “immorality”.

“Heartlander” lifestyles tend to be most tangible and observable in the practices of older participants at weddings. These are the individuals who prepare material artefacts and rituals that allude to “heartlander” lifestyles, or who ask the bridal couple to ensure that such artefacts or rituals are present on the wedding day. Suan, the *sang ke’um* I encountered in Amelia and Jim’s wedding epitomised these lifestyles in her language, her comportment and her ritualistic wedding practices. Her formal clothes were reminiscent of those worn in the 1950s, echoing journeys made by first-generation Chinese migrants from China. She spoke only Mandarin or Hokkien, and her expertise was in grounding the wedding in “traditional” practices. Along with performing the processional ritual, Suan also orchestrated the tea ceremony for Jim and Amelia. Suan made sure that family elders were served in specific sequence and with painstaking detail. At one point she very politely asked a pregnant aunt to stand rather than sit to receive tea from the couple, explaining the rules that only she had intimate knowledge of.

“Heartlander” lifestyles are the lifestyles that Chinese Singaporeans most often tend to connect to low levels of economic wealth, working-class jobs and lower social status (Chua 2003). Historical and economic processes have contributed greatly to these linkages³ (Kong and Yeoh 2003, PuruShotam 1998). Increasingly important trade flows between Singapore and the United States and Western European (particularly the United Kingdom) after World War II meant that fluency in English, whether to conduct business or work for a foreign Multinational Corporation became a comparative advantage. The state’s decision to eradicate dialects in the 1970s and 1980s in favour of Mandarin as a homogeneous “Chinese language” served to disconnect dialect-speaking first and second-generation individuals further from a rapidly evolving economy and society (Kong and Yeoh 2003). Individuals who have kept a

³ For an historical account of the connections between wealth and Chineseness, see Appendix 7A.

relatively narrower transdiasporic space have found themselves desynced from society as well as placed lower in the economic hierarchy.

Contributing to this connection is the highly apparent visibility of “heartlander” lifestyles (aesthetic markers) in less economically well-off neighbourhoods in Singapore. Throughout this chapter I have highlighted some of these areas, mostly consisting of densely packed HDB flats. These are the households that hold subtle yet conspicuous taste performances related to diasporic links and journeys. Family altars stacked with idols from Chinese mythology and religions (Tan 2001, Wanyan 2008) and ancestral tablets (small tablets related to specific ancestors in a family lineage) are placed prominently in the living room usually facing a window – as was the case in Ellysha, Joann and Amelia’s home, as this was considered good *feng shui* (Tan 2001). On the balcony of Ellysha’s home I witnessed a large table set out specially for the wedding, prepared by her parents, aunts and uncles. The table was not just a religious offering to heaven, it was also a shrine to the diasporic journeys of their family, containing aesthetic markers closely related to beliefs carried over from China. On one side was a large green field and on the other was the main entrance to the flat with the door left ajar, meaning that anyone walking past would see this taste performance.



Above: Offerings to Heaven in Ellysha’s home

Tensions between “Cosmopolitan” and “Heartlander” Lifestyles

The highly conspicuous consumption involving “heartlander” and “cosmopolitan” lifestyles in weddings mean that different taste performances are enacted in close proximity to each other. During my participant observation I noted both visible and subtle tensions between individuals who espoused different tastes and different lifestyles, mirroring the larger social landscape other scholars have observed in Singapore (Kong and Yeoh 2003). I argue that

these tensions generate opportunities for individuals to make taste decisions, creating social intimacies and distances between each other and between their ethnic lifestyles, and through this process produce different versions of Singaporean Chineseness.

These tensions appear to heavily involve the connections that different lifestyles have to different levels of economic wealth and perceived social status. Living a “cosmopolitan” lifestyle alludes to better-paying jobs and opportunities as well as a quotidian existence in more expensive (private) homes. Living a “heartlander” lifestyle conversely suggests economically less well-off lives, poorer job prospects and state-subsidised dwellings. Social and economic aspirations and the need to conspicuously consume the “correct” kind of goods become entangled with aesthetic markers and ethnic tastes. Practices and artefacts connected to one lifestyle or another take on an *economic* significance. In other words, what kinds of ethnic lifestyles one leads become associated with how much wealth one has or the degree of one’s social status.

No more apparent is this than in the way “heartland” practices in Singaporean Chinese weddings have attracted a derogatory label known as “Cheena”. “Cheenanness” is associated with explicitly performing “heartlander” tastes. In weddings this amounts to consuming ritualistic artefacts that are visually confrontational and contrasting with aesthetic markers associated with “cosmopolitan” lifestyles. The dynamics between participants during wedding toasts is a pertinent example of how a particular ethnic practice becomes linked to socially undesirable behaviour.

The toasting ceremony is a ritual at Singaporean Chinese wedding banquets. It involves gathering all the bridal couple’s close relatives onto the stage where they will each raise a glass of champagne and, with the rest of the banquet’s guests, make three protracted shouts of “yum seng” which translated from Cantonese means “drink to success⁴”. Oftentimes the groom will call upon his groomsmen to ascend the stage, and circling around a microphone, add as much volume to the shouts as possible. The belief is that the louder and longer the cheer, the more auspicious the toast and the more the couple will be blessed. However, in recent years bridal couples like James (30, IT Analyst) and Liling (25, IT Analyst) have started to replace the *yum seng* with more “cosmopolitan” forms of toasting.

James and Liling organised their wedding banquet at a restored historical building in Singapore, built during Singapore’s time as a British colony and patterned on European architecture. Polished glass walls mirrored sparkling chandeliers which illuminated the conserved arching roof and period features. Their guests were dressed well, in the smart casual style that characterises most wedding banquets of professional, white-collar bridal couples. As James and Liling ascended the stage and took their champagne glasses the

⁴ http://www.singlishdictionary.com/singlish_Y.htm

guests rose in preparation for a *yum seng*. But at this point the master of ceremonies (MC) announced that there would be no *yum seng* and instead the couple had opted for “Cheers”. The MC then counted to three before the guests mumbled a muted “Cheers”, unsure of why it replaced the normally boisterous toasting.



Above: Loud and Proud – Cadence (26, Sales Engineer) and Alex’s (27, Civil Servant) wedding banquet *yum seng* with friends and family

Some guests later took it upon themselves to have their own mini *yum seng* toast at their individual tables, as if they were trying to globalise and distance themselves from this new, apparently “Western” practice. Whilst they waited until everything had settled down, other guests at other wedding banquets I observed would choose to ignore the significance of “Cheers” and simply shout *yum seng* anyway, sometimes disrupting and hi-jacking what was going on on-stage. These modifications to the toasting ceremony along with guests’ staged mini-rebellions highlight the tensions between “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” desires and between different transdiasporic spaces. When confronted with a toasting ceremony (i.e. a taste performance) they did not like or could not understand, James and Liling’s guests chose to direct their social trajectories away from and create a social distance with the bridal couple’s performed ethnic lifestyles.

The practice of swapping *yum seng* with “Cheers” is becoming increasingly popular amongst bridal couples and appears to suggest an uneasiness with the use of “heartlander” rituals in “cosmopolitan” settings. Gordon, 32, a hotel manager who organises about 3 wedding banquets a week at a five-star hotel in Singapore, could only give an uneasy nod when I asked him if this was so. Gordon pointed out that the reason why *yum sengs* get changed to “Cheers” was that couples wanted something more “upmarket” to go with their wedding banquet. The act of shouting *yum seng* at the top of one’s voice only served as a visual and

aural disconnect to the opulence of five-star hotel dining. Not only that, *yum seng* is a Cantonese word, further solidifying it as part of a “heartlander” lifestyle, and not something individuals steering their trajectories towards “cosmopolitan” lifestyles would do. In other words, the *yum seng* ceremony was *Cheena* and a matter of ethnic distaste for individuals who *disliked* “heartlander” lifestyles.

Conclusion

Taste performances are an extremely useful way for researchers to observe and interact with individuals’ ethnic tastes and ethnic lifestyles, which are made tangible and visible for others to see. Taste performances differ greatly from individual to individual, and when different taste performances come into contact, individuals will also react in different ways. At times social intimacies with the performer or her ethnic lifestyle may be created if an observer likes a taste performance, at other times she may distance herself. In Singaporean Chinese weddings two socially prominent ethnic lifestyles are often enacted in taste performances and come into tension with each other. Each embrace different transdiasporic spaces, and each generates differing and often diverging reactions. Two further questions are raised here – One, what processes lead an individual to like or dislike a taste performance and two, how does the connection between socially prominent ethnic lifestyles and levels of economic wealth impact on individuals’ ethnic tastes?

The ambiguity of an individual’s reaction to taste performances suggests that it is difficult to predict what exactly will happen when contrasting taste performances come into contact with each other. During my participant observation of weddings I have noticed that the result is often distance rather than intimacy. In other words, difference often leads to *divergence*. What we do not yet know is the exact process that forms divergence between individuals and/or their ethnic lifestyles when taste performances differ. In chapter 8 I will argue that *aesthetic dissonance* is a core mechanism in explaining the ways individuals like or do not like a particular taste performance. Aesthetic dissonance characterises the juxtaposition or confrontation between different visual aesthetic markers in taste performances, and works as an explanatory process to the creation of social distances and intimacies and hence transdiasporic ethnicity.

The second question demands that we examine *economic* and *commercial* activities to see how links between ethnic lifestyles and wealth are perpetuated amongst contemporary Chinese Singaporeans, and what impact these links have on the ethnic tastes of individuals as well as their reactions to taste performances. In chapter 9 I will argue that commercial activities and professional wedding participants contribute to a *commercially dominant wedding aesthetic* that perpetuates links between “cosmopolitan” lifestyles and higher levels

of economic wealth. However, in order to understand how these mechanisms work, it is first necessary to understand the dynamics of differences in taste performances.

Chapter 8: Ethnic Taste and Aesthetic Dissonance

Introduction and Overview

In this chapter I will argue that aesthetic dissonance is a core process that shapes Chinese Singaporeans' ethnic tastes, and in doing so produces Singaporean Chineseness. Aesthetic dissonance¹ is one of the two processes I am highlighting that shape ethnic tastes. It is defined here as a *process by which taste performances or aesthetic markers are contrasted and juxtaposed against each other, resulting in individuals making taste decisions that shape their ethnic tastes*. Aesthetic dissonance arises when different taste performances come into visual contact with each other, and where individuals are confronted with *taste decisions*, meaning that they are made to decide whether they like or dislike another individual's performed ethnic lifestyle, and whether they would become socially intimate with or distant to that lifestyle.

Aesthetic dissonance has three important and interconnected characteristics – One, aesthetic dissonance shapes ethnic tastes on a multi-scalar level, from individual to institution. Work on institutional aesthetic dissonance has been well explored, but individual aesthetic dissonance is often either overlooked or confused with hybridic aesthetics. Because of this, my analysis of aesthetic dissonance in this chapter will be centred on individualised, small scale forms of dissonance that occur constantly and significantly but in a subtle and sometimes almost imperceptible manner. Two, aesthetic dissonance shapes ethnic taste through multi-sensory means, although it is still primarily a visual process. Our other senses position and contextualise our visual engagements with aesthetic dissonance, meaning that it is important to simultaneously take *other* senses into consideration. Three, aesthetic dissonance shapes ethnic tastes through *real*, *experiential* and *expected* instances. Individuals who have experienced real instances of dissonance may *expect* it to happen again and work to *prevent* it, *validating* their taste decisions that would have arisen from the dissonance that they were trying to prevent. In other words, the fear or expectation of dissonance occurring shapes ethnic tastes and social distances as well.

Aesthetic dissonance in Singaporean Chinese weddings reflects everyday life and often takes place between “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” aesthetic markers – and in this case results more often in social distances rather than social intimacies. Individuals compete for *aesthetic dominance*, or how a wedding should “look” and what aesthetic markers are used. This competition often results in dissonance in two ways – This first is when acts of *aesthetic territorialisation* occur, where individuals, artefacts and practices are segregated and compartmentalised in an attempt to eliminate a juxtaposition of taste performances, but

¹ In this chapter and for the rest of this thesis when I refer to dissonance I mean aesthetic dissonance, unless I make a clear distinction

actually reinforce contrasts. The second is when individuals spontaneously intervene during a wedding to change a ritual, a sequence of events or another participant's comportment. Such intervention accentuates a juxtaposition of markers, causing participants to make taste decisions that often result in social distancing. I will deal with this aspect at the end of this chapter.

However, taste decisions that arise from aesthetic dissonance are situational, ambiguous and textured by the lived experiences and circumstances of individuals. This means that any one incident of aesthetic dissonance can lead to a multitude of taste decisions, depending on how, where and when dissonance takes place. Although aesthetic dissonance appears to paint a grim portrait of juxtaposed taste performances, it does not imply an inevitable outcome. Aesthetic dissonance's ambiguity and situationality means that it is possible to create and synchronise performances so that dissonant and contrasting markers could possibly result in social intimacies rather than distances.

Mapping out Aesthetic Dissonance

Aesthetic dissonance arises from the *ambiguity* of taste performances. Different individuals perceive different performances in different ways (Chapter 7). When different taste performances are positioned in close visual proximity to each other, it is possible for individuals to read these performances as confrontational and juxtaposed. Individuals are then faced with making a decision of whether they like or dislike (or are apathetic) to the performances or aesthetic markers that are not part of their ethnic lifestyles. They can choose to like these performances, thereby redirecting their social trajectories towards lifestyles espousing these markers, but more often than not they choose to dislike them, directing their trajectories both *away* from the markers and further *towards* other ethnic lifestyles.

Scholars have noted instances of aesthetic dissonance in urban environments, but have yet to give it a name. For example, Eade (1997) noted how Bangladeshi immigrants moving into the Tower Hamlets area of London have created a "look" of ethnic occupation (Soja 1997) through the establishing of "youth clubs, cultural centres, prayer halls...(and) mosques" (Eade 1997:138). These markers were impactful and significant because they were perceived to be *different* to the environment that preceded them. Whether it is the architecture of the mosques, the addition of Bengali languages to street signs, or new shops selling Bangladeshi produce, these aesthetic markers *contrasted* with the dwelled, material environment of the established, mostly white residents who saw themselves as the "indigenous" population. These incidents of aesthetic dissonance contributed to the rise in tensions between groups and individuals, which was embodied in the portrayal of migrants as "foreign invaders" and the popularity of neo-fascist politics (Knowles 2003).

The rise of neo-fascism and rising tensions in Eade's example is an extreme example of social distancing arising from aesthetic dissonance. But conflict and confrontation exist on an everyday basis and in everyday lives in more subtle ways. In a wedding, aesthetic dissonance is an ongoing process that arises constantly because individuals continue to perceive various ambiguous taste performances as confrontational, juxtaposed and something they did not like. For us to understand how aesthetic dissonance shapes ethnic taste amongst Chinese Singaporeans, it is first necessary to understand just *how* aesthetic dissonance shapes ethnic tastes.

Aesthetic Dissonance is Multi-Scalar

Studies that emphasise aesthetic dissonance have a tendency to focus on larger scale events and artefacts like ethnic parades and architectural differences (Eade 1997, Soja 1997), especially that of work on urban cities and the "look" of ethnic occupation. Although some work has gone into looking at juxtaposed ethnic identifications on an individual basis (Song 1999, Back 2004), not enough attention has been paid to the active process of aesthetic dissonance of *insignias* (Knowles 2003) occurring on the body. When we consider different insignias on the body, it is often taken to mean that the individual is partaking in some kind of hybridic or syncretic activity. However, this view shares the same problem with diaspora (overarching definitions), assuming that many individuals engage in hybridic practices in the same way, achieving a largely similar coherent comportment.

Individualised instances of aesthetic dissonance show that this is clearly not the case. Just because an individual consumes different aesthetic markers or different cultural forms does not mean that she is hybridic or syncretic. The use of aesthetic markers could have easily arisen from coercions, peer pressure, experimentation or otherwise. Even long-term levels of consumption can be textured by group conformity to scripts of behaviour (Appiah and Gutmann 1996) handed down by dominant members of an individual's kinship or social group (Song 2003). Individualised aesthetic dissonance exposes instances that undermine claims of hybridity, exposing combinations of aesthetic markers that individuals perceive to "not quite fit".

Aspects of dress and insignias are highly important when analysing aesthetic dissonance. In particular, jewellery presented to and placed upon the bride during the tea ceremony exposes the active and lived processes of aesthetic dissonance. Unlike wedding gowns which are worn one at a time, a bride is able to wear multiple pieces of jewellery from multiple gifters at the same time. In other words, she becomes a blank slate upon which taste performances can be inscribed and enacted *simultaneously* by *different* individuals (Woodward 2005), including herself (Gell 1998).

A case study of contrasting family lifestyles and ethnic tastes is a potent example of individualised and imposed taste performances leading to aesthetic dissonance. Joo Hong (32, Business Development Manager) and Cerlyn (30, Business Manager) were married in 2006, and performed two conventional tea ceremonies at each other's family home². Joo Hong's family lived in an Executive HDB flat in the west of Singapore. His parents spoke Mandarin and Hokkien but he and his sister were fluent in English. Joo Hong's home was steeped in aesthetic markers emphasising diasporic journeys and kinship connections. In the hallway of their flat hung a special "blanket-banner", sewn specifically for the wedding. On it was inscribed the names of Joo Hong's uncles who had financially contributed to the making of the banner, and effectively acted as a superimposed image of his family tree³. The family altar was particularly large with the idols of three major Taoist/Buddhist Gods (a Hokkien deity known as *Huat Zhu Gong*, the Merchant God *Tua Beh Gong* and the Goddess of Mercy *Guan Yin*). The presence of *Huat Zhu Gong (Fa Zhu Gong)* in particular is a significant visual and material link to the diasporic and territorial linkages between Joo Hong's family and the Fujian province in China because of the deity's geographical specificity (Feuchtwang and Wang 2001:25).

Joo Hong's family and extended family appeared to embrace their diasporic journeys very deeply, practising rituals and using markers they considered to be *chuan tong*, or Mandarin for "tradition". Joo Hong's parents made it a point to wear red for the tea ceremony, and to decorate the house with as many red items as possible, even appropriating a jar of British-brand strawberry jam for its red lid. Invitations to the tea ceremony for Joo Hong's uncles were written in Chinese calligraphy and delivered on red paper. Every food item considered auspicious by Taoist beliefs (Tan 2001) was present, wrapped in red paper or bottled in red-lidded jars.

Although Cerlyn's family practised a similar mix of Taoist and Buddhist beliefs, their home was far less decorated with aesthetic markers pertaining to diasporic journeys. These artefacts were limited to a small altar affixed to the wall of their balcony. Instead, it was more immediate memories and life journeys that visually dominated the walls of their private apartment, where Cerlyn's father hung his certificates of achievement. Travel photos and photos of award ceremonies surrounded and dwarfed the television set. A small extra altar with wedding candles was tucked away in the corner of the living room, its importance seemingly token. Their home, while cheerful was muted in its colour in comparison to Joo

² The tea ceremony is an important aspect of the wedding because family elders consider it an act of introduction and acceptance (Freedman 1957, Wanyan 2008). By serving tea, the bride or groom is introduced to his or her new family, and by accepting and drinking the tea, the family elder acknowledges a new addition into their family.

³ In an interview with Joo Hong's mother and sister after the wedding, I was informed that the banner was a show of authority for the family's position, as well as a sign of respect towards Joo Hong's grandmother.

Hong's home. In an extension to this material space, Cerlyn's gown and jewellery were equally muted and subtle, encompassing shades of silver, white and grey.

During the wedding, Joo Hong and Cerlyn both kneeled to serve tea at the tea ceremony, an act rarely performed amongst contemporary Chinese Singaporean couples. As each cup of tea was presented and accepted, a gift of money or jewellery was returned to the couple. If the gift was jewellery, it was immediately placed upon Joo Hong or Cerlyn. This practice is commonly known as *Si Dian Jin* (Freedman 1957), or Mandarin for "four points of gold", in which a new bride has to be adorned with gold on four parts of her body – neck, ears, wrist and finger. As Joo Hong's extended family was large, Cerlyn was soon adorned with gold jewellery laid over her own silver and platinum bridal jewellery.



Above: Cerlyn and her hoard

Cerlyn's carefully planned attire became mismatched and Christmas tree-like. Each additional piece of jewellery contrasted further with her gown and her existing jewellery. As a matter of courtesy Cerlyn continued wearing the jewellery for a short period after, but it was this contrasting adornment and styles of jewellery on Cerlyn that became an instance of aesthetic dissonance. Not only did the colours hang awkwardly against each other, the styles of jewellery were haphazard, having been bought piece by piece by individual family members. At the same time, the price tags on several pieces were still attached – a common way to conspicuously assure other participants of the value of the jewellery.

Joo Hong's relatives saw their inscriptions as a way of blessing the bride, but they were also performing their ethnic tastes by adhering to the "tradition" of *Si Dian Jin*. Cerlyn's bridesmaids found the whole incident extremely humorous, teasing her about her additional gaudy gold chains and bracelets. When confronted with this aesthetic dissonance they were

forced into making a taste decision about whether they liked what they saw or not. In this instance many of them chose to dislike the aesthetics of yellow gold and an outdated styling, especially when contrasted against Cerlyn's white gown. By disliking the gifted gold jewellery Cerlyn's friends did two things, they created a social distance between their ethnic lifestyles and those that were espoused by the gold jewellery. In doing so they also created a social intimacy with Cerlyn's contrasting and more contemporary platinum jewellery.

Aesthetic Dissonance is Multi-Sensory

Although my focus on ethnic taste and aesthetic markers in this thesis is primarily visual, aesthetic dissonance can and does involve other senses, particularly that of hearing and smelling. This is because taste performances are also multi-sensory⁴. In our everyday encounters we engage with objects, individuals and spaces using all five of our sense. Tones of music, the smell of food, individuals speaking in unfamiliar languages and accents are all examples of how we engage with aesthetic markers and taste performances in ways other than seeing. It is important to account for the contribution that these other human senses make in aesthetic dissonance because they also factor into the situationality and ambiguity of dissonant encounters and the outcomes that follow them.

Aesthetic dissonance exists in weddings as a multi-sensory process, albeit one that is still primarily visual. Preparations for the wedding usefully illustrate how different ethnic lifestyles are being led within the same household, but subtly compartmentalised in different rooms under one roof. In chapter 7 (*Taste performances are special and /or mundane*) I described the exterior of Joann's (27, Designer) home to explain the personal yet public nature of taste performances. Here I will use their interior to explain zoning and aesthetic dissonance. I arrived at Joann's home at 6am in the morning, when the neighbourhood was still blanketed in darkness with few residents awake. When I entered the flat I was immediately accosted with a variety of different and contrasting smells. In the kitchen, Joann's mother, grandmother and aunt were making Singapore curry for guests arriving later in the morning – this involved frying curry paste in oil before browning the chicken, which meant the pungency of the curry permeated the living and dining areas of the flat. Later on Joann's mother, then her father took joss sticks and lit them to recite chants at the family altar in the living room. At the same time, I found Joann in the master bedroom having her make-up applied by a professional. Liberal amounts of hairspray and perfume meant that the room smelled distinctly different from the pungent curry outside. The room was air-conditioned but the door was left ajar, allowing for a intermingling of scents and odours.

⁴ I implied this in Chapter 7, but reserved my explanation of multi-sensorial taste performances to this Chapter to better illustrate aesthetic dissonance

Joann's flat also echoed with the voices of different participants in conversation with each other. Her bridesmaids had stayed the night in a spare room to prepare for the wedding, and I could hear them conversing in Mandarin and colloquial "Singlish" – a blend of Chinese dialects, English, Mandarin and Malay. Her grandmother chatted in Hokkien with her aunt in the kitchen. Joann, her sister and the make-up artist spoke in English in the master bedroom, and Joann's mother and father recited Hokkien chants in the living room at the family altar, praying for a good marriage for their daughter. In other homes I visited the TV would also be on to entertain young children, often screening a Mandarin language variety show. This cacophony of voices and languages is very common at the start of the wedding, where individuals are frantically preparing in close physical proximity. It is a reminder of the myriad transdiasporic spaces Chinese Singaporeans are able to draw their ethnic identifications from.



Above: Joss Sticks and Hair Spray in Joann's home

At the same time, the aural and olfactorious juxtaposition of cultural forms act to accentuate one ethnic lifestyle against another. The contrast between taste performances are amplified because of their close proximity. Dissonance is then created because of the contrast, and individuals are more likely to make taste decisions about something they may like or not like. The case of Joann's home illustrates contrast, but at the same time shows that aesthetic dissonance need not lead to social distancing⁵. I will explore this aspect later on in this

⁵ For an example of how a aural form of aesthetic dissonance can lead to social distances being created, see chapter 7 and my example on *yum seng* toasting rituals at wedding banquets.

chapter when I examine the ramifications of taste decisions arising from aesthetic dissonance.

Aesthetic Dissonance is Experiential and Expected

Aesthetic dissonance's tangibility means it is also an experiential process. Individuals who have observed, experienced and engaged with aesthetic dissonance are able to draw upon these experiences when living their everyday lives. They are also able to draw upon the experiences of other individuals within their social group, as evidenced by newly-married brides passing wedding timetables and checklists to brides-to-be through online wedding forums (Heng 2007), who then appropriate it for their own uses. The result of this is that weddings are both scripted and spontaneous – they replicate a general template of events, but also contain a vast number of subtle differences that defy definitive categorisation.

This replicated nature of weddings means that individuals who have experienced a few weddings before their own are able to anticipate what their wedding will look like. In other words, they can and do *expect* aesthetic dissonance to happen when they take into account the various participants who will be present at the wedding. The expected and anticipated nature of aesthetic dissonance means that ramifications arising from dissonance can be felt even when dissonance does not actually occur. If one thinks that there is going to be visual confrontation in a ritual, and one explicitly and deliberately acts to prevent or avoid that visual confrontation, then the individual is steering her social trajectory in one way or another, thereby fulfilling what would have happened had aesthetic dissonance occurred in the first place. Acts of prevention do not just *reveal* an individual's ethnic taste; they also *strengthen* the current trajectories that an individual is taking.

Two aspects of the wedding show how expected dissonance can result in the making of taste decisions and social distances. The first is the avoidance of inelegance, illustrated through the ritualistic consumption of food and its aesthetic effect on a bride's comportment. I return to Sonia (29, Architect) and Kian Wee's (31, Architect) wedding experience. After Kian Wee fetched Sonia from her makeshift "home"⁶, the bridal party proceeded to Kian Wee's home in the west of Singapore. Kian Wee resides in a large HDB Executive Apartment⁷, he is the first graduate in this family, and his parents are practicing Taoists who converse mostly in Mandarin. Their home was similar to that of Cerlyn's, showing few aesthetic markers apart from a small altar. The most prominent item on their wall was a large family portrait of Kian Wee and his siblings in their graduation attire, suggesting that his parents took great pride in the *progression* of their children, rather than their extended, diasporic lineage.

⁶ See Chapter 7: Taste Performances have Ambiguous Responses

⁷ See Appendix 6A for HDB Housing Types

As the couple sat in a room, Kian Wee's mother, aunt and grandmother gathered to discuss what to do next. It was decided that they should eat *mee sua* before the tea ceremony commenced. Kian Wee's mother brought two bowls and two pairs of chopsticks into the room. In each bowl was a portion of noodles and two eggs in sticky sweet syrup. *Mee sua* is a dish normally served during specific occasions, like a birthday or a wedding. The dish is loaded with meaning – long noodles are meant to signify a long life (or long lasting marriage), the eggs emphasise fertility and/or life and the sweetness of the syrup is a hope for a happy (sweet) life or relationship⁸. Dishes like *mee sua* are regularly served to the bridal couple at weddings, working around similar themes of taste, shape and meaning. A more common variation is *tang yuen* – small sticky balls of flour in sweet syrup.

Sonia did not want to eat the *mee sua* at first. She did not realise the meanings attributed to the dish by Kian Wee's mother and interpreted the act as a mundane meal. In other weddings I have observed, brides are typically very hesitant to consume food like *mee sua* for three reasons. One, they fear the syrup and eggs will stain their carefully and professionally applied make-up, and without a make-up artist on call their personal aesthetic would be affected. Two, dishes like *mee sua* are typically eaten from a bowl with a spoon and no fork. It becomes difficult to take small bite sizes of the food, rather requiring the consumer to slurp and bite – behaviour that seemed unbecoming of a dressed-up, made-up bride. Three, they are sometimes more concerned about digestion and appetite rather than the cultural significance of the dish. As some brides on the internet mentioned



Above: Sonia and Kian Wee gingerly break the egg

ladies, my frds (friends) got (did) bite the *tang yuen* (flour ball) eh... haha i went to kpo (inspect) her photo then went to ask her.. she said dun (didn't) bite.. wan (what if it) to land(ed) up in somewhere meh (exclamation)... haha⁹ - Ling

I have to bite la (exclamation)..how to swallow whole...will look 'ugly' esp if PG (photographer) and VG (videographer) filming and there I go trying my best to swallow it whole¹⁰ - sOuL sLaYeR

⁸ During my childhood my mother would also make this regularly for my grandmother's birthday, bringing it in a Tiffin carrier to whichever restaurant the birthday party was held that year.

⁹ <http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/1402428.html>

I heard my mum is cooking eggs with red dates soup to let me eat when I come back from the tea ceremony... they want the egg in sweet sweet syrup.. if dont want to eat the egg, need to use chopstick to cut to half... dont sound appetizing to me...¹¹

Placid_Mind

When it was explained to Sonia that eating the *mee sua* was not a meal but rather a ritual, she happily complied. But in that instance between serving the food and interacting with it and realising its significance, Sonia (and many other brides) *expected* a clash of aesthetics in the form of messy and awkward noodles that might stain their white gown. The anticipation of dissonance is enough for brides to dislike or reject this taste performance, distancing themselves from the practices of their elders.

The second example brings me back to the *yum seng* ceremony I described in Chapter 7 (*Tensions between “Cosmopolitan” and “Heartlander” Lifestyles*). Here, the expectation and anticipation of a Hokkien phrase shouted out loud juxtaposed against an elegant, expensive and “Western” dinner setting was enough for James and Liling to opt for a more subtle and muted “Cheers”. However, in an attempt to avoid dissonance, James created *another* kind of dissonance – a disconnect between established practice and contemporary desires. To his guests (and to many other guests at other wedding banquets) the use of “Cheers” simply did not seem to fit into a Chinese wedding. To them aesthetic dissonance was in the disruption of what they normally expected at the wedding. Some guests would choose to dislike the practice and socially distance themselves from it by staging their own *yum seng* toast.

¹⁰ <http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/1400475.html>

¹¹ <http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/1400475.html>



Above: A more subdued “Cheers” toast at Ciara and Joshua’s wedding

Aesthetic Dissonance and Social Distancing amongst Chinese Singaporeans

It is now possible to paint a picture of the social intimacies and distances that are being created amongst Chinese Singaporeans through aesthetic dissonance. Aesthetic dissonance in Singaporean Chinese weddings more often than not results in social distances being made. This distancing is textured by the social relationships and circumstances in which dissonance is taking place. Individuals compete for *aesthetic dominance* in how the wedding should “look”, engaging in negotiations both before and during the wedding. Their actions arising from these negotiations often result in the solidifying of ethnic tastes and greater social distances created between individuals and between their ethnic lifestyles.

Dissonance in weddings often arises from conflicting, sometimes antagonistic relationships between individuals (often between older and younger individuals from different generations) over their ethnic tastes. This is exemplified in the relationships between the bridal couple and their family elders, who often have divergent views about how a wedding should be conducted and how it should “look”. Family elders tend to embrace practices pertaining more towards what they perceive to be “Chinese traditions”, whereas bridal couples see little meaning in rituals considered to be outdated, unglamorous, and associated with being a “heartlander”. The confrontations and antagonism in the dynamics of these relationships means that the interaction of aesthetic markers used by different individuals in the wedding often result in aesthetic dissonance, which then tends to result in social distancing and a solidifying of ethnic tastes.

Such relationships pivot around a competition for *aesthetic dominance* in the wedding, which is characterised by an active negotiation about which aesthetic markers are used *and* are important in the wedding, or in other words, whose ethnic lifestyles and taste performances are most prominent. Negotiations occur both before and during the wedding. Negotiations that occur before the wedding tend to result in an *aesthetic territorialisation* of material environments in which participants demarcate and separate spaces along lines of ethnic tastes. These are made visible in consumption decisions about decorations, rituals, events, venues, photography and so on. Territorialisation leads to social distancing between individuals as well as a reinforcing of territorialised ethnic tastes and lifestyles. Negotiations during the wedding are characterised by sudden interventions by (usually peripheral) participants who spontaneously and unexpectedly change the way a wedding is conducted. I will deal with each in turn.

Aesthetic Territorialisation

During my study I noticed how different spaces became aesthetically appropriated and territorialised by different participants. These spaces were mapped out in chapter 6, from the bodies of my key informants (especially the bride) to the personal spaces of bedrooms to communal living rooms to semi-public liminal corridors to large public carparks, churches, void decks and hotel banquet halls. Territorialisation is a symptom of an active negotiation between individuals who wish to enact taste performances whilst minimising or avoiding aesthetic dissonance, but in doing so solidify their ethnic tastes and create the social distances that might have been generated by aesthetic dissonance in the first place.

In some instances entire events are separately organised to achieve this. Katie (23, Teacher) and Lim Huat (24, Engineer) were married in 2005. Both informants are degree holders and are fluent in English but converse in Mandarin/ Dialect with their families. Both belonged to lower-middle-income families, and resided in HDB flats. When they organised their wedding they chose to demarcate and separate their guests into different events over two days. Most significantly they organised a wedding dinner for their extended families, and then a special luncheon the next day for their peers. The juxtaposition of aesthetics was marked – the wedding dinner was held at a famous Chinese restaurant from the 1980s and decorated with aesthetic markers that suggested a “heartlander” ethnic lifestyle. Red tablecloths, Chinese cuisine and *yum sengs* were all in the order of the day. The banquet manager Judy conversed with the bridal couple in Mandarin, and the banquet was narrated throughout in Mandarin, including the bridal couple’s speeches. Their guests, mostly contemporaries and peers of their parents, were dressed both formally and casually. Some arrived in their everyday wear, with cigarette packets stowed underneath their sleeves, making an odd

rectangular badge on their arm. Many stepped outside to smoke, leaving the restaurant half-empty for a large part of the dinner.



Above: The couple walked into the restaurant under the bright glow of a spotlight and wispy dried ice smoke on the carpet during the wedding banquet

The luncheon the following day was very different – it was held at a five-star hotel grill and bar – the hotel being part of an international chain of European-themed hotels. The bar was muted and dark, its décor echoing colonial-era bungalows dotted throughout Singapore’s west and north. Katie and Lim Huat’s guests were their peers – also tertiary educated and English speaking. They dressed as formally as a luncheon would allow, with long dresses, blazers and ties. When the bridal couple arrived they formed a welcome line and showered them with rose petals, a stark contrast to the dried ice smoke and spotlight from the Chinese restaurant the night before. The food was a “Western” buffet of bread, meats, pastas and salads. The bridal couple’s speeches were in English, and they enacted a “first dance” performance in accordance with “white wedding” conventions (Mead 2007). There was no *yum seng*, instead replaced with a simple speech and a “cheers”.



Above: First Dance

The separation of events, guests, aesthetic markers, venues, food, dress and practices in Katie and Lim Huat's wedding all suggest that they had expected dissonance and territorialised their ethnic lifestyles. The wedding dinner at the Chinese restaurant was reserved for their parents, relatives and "heartland" friends. The luncheon was reserved for their "cosmopolitan" peers. Each venue catered to and espoused different ethnic tastes and the act of separation appeared to be an attempted and deliberate avoidance of aesthetic dissonance. However, in the act of avoidance, Katie, Lim Huat and their parents have *reified* the very impact of aesthetic dissonance. Because they expected dissonance to happen, they physically and chronologically bifurcated the wedding into distinct segments. Doing this simply reinforced the differences in ethnic lifestyles and the social distances between these lifestyles.

Participant Intervention and Social Distancing

Not every bridal couple is able to so neatly separate events and guests in the way Katie and Lim Huat did. In other weddings negotiations continue well into the wedding itself, with spontaneous decisions and changes occurring without warning from various participants. Andrea (23, Admin Assistant) and Cameron's (24, Technical Support Officer) wedding showed how participants can sometimes intervene without warning to enact their own taste performances and in doing so generate aesthetic dissonance. Andrea's home epitomised a "heartlander" lifestyle and the low levels of economic wealth that have become attached to such lifestyles. Andrea resided in an relatively impoverished area of Singapore, her parents

were blue-collar, lower-income individuals and they shared one bedroom amongst approximately 5 people. When I visited their home I saw thin folded foam mattresses stacked in a corner of the room, and the sofa had been removed to accommodate the bridal party, itself being replaced with a row of cheap plastic chairs. The kitchen retained its original bare concrete surface, a memory from my grandmother's flat in Chinatown. The most prominent and ornate item in the flat was a large family altar, double the size of the television.

Although her immediate family was small, some of her extended relatives were Malaysian Chinese and had made a special trip to Singapore for the wedding. One particular aunt, Kim Huat, took it upon herself to conduct some rituals as she saw fit, without warning Andrea or her mother. When Cameron entered the flat after the door games, I and Nellie (the professional videographer) positioned ourselves to photograph and videotape Cameron walking into Andrea's room to fetch her. Cameron was expecting this as well, except that Kim Huat intervened as he stepped into the room. With one hand she took him by the wrist and with another hand she took Andrea's wrist. With the bridal couple looking confused, and I and Nellie scrambling to reposition ourselves, she led them out of the room, blocking my line of sight and instructed them to bow to Andrea's parents. Later on in the carpark she gave Andrea explicit instructions on what to do once she reached Cameron's home, making Andrea promise that it would be done.



Above: Both Nellie and I failed to capture this moment “properly” and from our desired angles

Kim Huat appeared to be taking on the role of a *sang ke'um*, as Suan did in Amelia's wedding in chapter 7 (*Taste performances are explicit and outward-facing*). However, no one in Andrea's family had asked Kim Huat to do this, and her actions confused everyone. When we were out of earshot of Kim Huat, Andrea and Cameron resolved not to comply and to carry on the wedding as they had planned it. However, what happened in Andrea's home was an extreme example of how weddings may be hijacked by participants. Kim Huat sought to impress upon the wedding her own interpretation of how the wedding should proceed, or in other words, how it should "look". Her intervention was a taste performance that generated an incidence of aesthetic dissonance, and the reactions of some individuals observing and participating in it (Andrea, Cameron, I and Nellie) was to solidify our own tastes and distance ourselves from her ethnic lifestyles.

Kim Huat's actions also suggest that aesthetic dissonance does not have to occur between deeply contrasting ethnic lifestyles or aesthetic markers. Unlike most of the examples so far that contrasted a more "diasporic Chinese" lifestyle with more global "Western" lifestyles (*yum seng* vs Cheers, luncheons vs banquets, jewellery styles etc)¹², Kim Huat's way of conducting a wedding was nuanced but different enough for other participants to discern a contrast or juxtaposition of their lifestyles against hers. It implies that dissonance can occur on a very subtle level, which creates a challenge for us as researchers to observe. In my concluding chapter I will revisit how our interpretations and understandings of ethnic hybridity are affected by aesthetic dissonance.

Aesthetic Dissonance and Social Intimacies

Whilst the ambiguity of taste performances mean that individuals can find aesthetic dissonance in all sorts of different encounters with other ethnic lifestyles, it also means that aesthetic dissonance does not necessarily result in social distancing, neither does it mean that all individuals present at an occurrence of aesthetic dissonance see performances as juxtaposed or confrontational. In certain circumstances, aesthetic dissonance is greeted with a sense of celebration and different ethnic lifestyles are treated as "exotic" rather than threatening. In these situations, aesthetic dissonance can result in the creation of social intimacies rather than social distances. Creating social intimacies with a contrasting ethnic lifestyle can often lead to the widening of one's transdiasporic spaces, and a more catholic set of ethnic tastes.

In weddings, individuals might use dissonance as a way of directing their social trajectories towards other ethnic lifestyles. Guy (M, 33, Groom, Caucasian French) and Dorma (F, 32, Bride, Chinese Singaporean) were married in 2006 in both France and in Singapore. The

¹² I recognise that these comparisons may come across as being too categorical, but I have done this in order to show the greatest degree and most observable forms of contrast.

wedding in France involved a typical civil ceremony at the town hall followed by a dinner at a hotel in the countryside. Upon reaching the hotel, the bridal couple chose to perform a tea ceremony for both their parents. This came alongside a running commentary from Dorma to her French guests, who treated the scene with a mix of interest and bemusement. At the same time, Guy's sister dressed her toddler son up in a mock-Chinese outfit complete with a bowl hat, and Guy's family specially decorated the wedding dinner venue with Chinese lanterns as a surprise for Dorma. These three incidents served to create more of a contrast between different ethnic lifestyles than some kind of coherent hybridic whole. But in this case aesthetic dissonance did not result in social distancing. Guy's family's acts of consuming aesthetic markers they felt corresponded to Dorma's ethnic lifestyles were, as Dorma put it, "a way to make me feel welcome". It was not as if they had co-opted these markers into their everyday life, but this temporary consumption allowed them to create a sense of solidarity with Dorma and her family. In other words, aesthetic dissonance was created so that individuals could forge social intimacies with each other.



Above: Chopsticks balancing peanuts proved novel

These social intimacies could be created for two reasons. The first was that the circumstances of ethnic lifestyles coming into contact with each other were non-confrontational. Guy and Dorma's marriage did not appear to be one that was opposed by their families, judging from the warm receptions each side received in France and Singapore. In this way neither family felt a sense of "invasion" or "violation" that the residents of Tower Hamlets felt when new migrants started living in their midst. In other words, neither group felt threatened by a different ethnic lifestyle presented to them, and rather than direct their social trajectories away from individual or ethnic lifestyle, they directed them towards these new lifestyles, albeit temporarily. Furthermore, there was little sign of competition for aesthetic

dominance in the wedding. Guy, Dorma and their elders treated the décor of the hotel and other locations with an apparently *laissez-faire* attitude, reducing chances for antagonism and distancing-related aesthetic dissonance.

The second was the displacement of Singaporean Chineseness into a non-Chinese, non-Singaporean context. The aesthetic markers (tea ceremony, lanterns, outfits) associated with Dorma's ethnic lifestyle became divorced from the economic hierarchies that texture Chineseness in Singapore. When presented to individuals in France, they were then an "exotic" ethnic lifestyle, as if they had sprung to life from a television documentary about a place far away. A conspicuous performance of taste involving Dorma's ethnic lifestyle was not linked to whichever position she occupied in Singapore's economic hierarchy. Aesthetic markers were thus treated as novel and to a certain extent neutral. In other words, when transported outside of the context of Singapore, Singaporean Chineseness loses much of its political and colonial baggage.

Conclusion: Making Ethnicity through Aesthetic Dissonance

Aesthetic dissonance is a key way through which Chinese Singaporeans make ethnicity. It is multi-scalar, multi-sensory, experiential and expected. It occurs both when taste performances come into contrast with each other, *and* when individuals *expect* a juxtaposition of aesthetic markers. In a wedding, aesthetic dissonance occurs through a competition for aesthetic dominance, or how a wedding should "look". This competition gives rise to a territorialisation of ethnic lifestyles and sudden interventions that spontaneously affect rituals. In both cases, social distances are more likely to be created through aesthetic dissonance than social intimacies.

Social distancing means that an individual is steering at least part of her social trajectory *further towards* her current, embraced sets of aesthetic markers. Her tastes become *more* of what she previously liked, rather than something different she encountered in that instance of dissonance. At the same time however, social relationships, circumstances and the social and material environment in which aesthetic dissonance takes place can also lead to *social intimacies*. In this case the *opposite* becomes true – an individual may choose to include or embrace new and different aesthetic markers, widening her transdiasporic spaces and changing the shapes of her ethnic lifestyles and/or tastes.

Creating social intimacies and distances between ethnic lifestyles contribute to individuals' notions of how a Singaporean Chinese wedding should occur, how Chinese Singaporeans comport themselves, and how individuals should comport themselves. In other words, these actions affect one's notions of what it means to be Singaporean Chinese. However, throughout my time as a participant observer, I noted that social distancing was far more

common than social closeness. Individuals were far more ready to keep to their ethnic tastes and lifestyles than to increase their options, especially when the options seemed attached to less than desirable social lifestyles like low levels of economic wealth. Bridal couples who appeared keen to have a “cosmopolitan” wedding did not appear enthusiastic when they realised that they had to incorporate “heartlander” practices and artefacts, like a the *yum seng* ceremony or eating *mee sua* or *tang yuen*.

Social distancing helps to create social boundaries, adding to the “us vs them” debate. In this way I argue that aesthetic dissonance and social distancing it is useful in explaining instances of boundary-making between self-identified “ethnic groups” (Song 2003). Watching aesthetic dissonance, social distancing and solidifications of tastes allow us to capture the flashpoints between individuals who espouse different ethnic lifestyles, and understand their reactions and subsequent actions. My use of aesthetic dissonance pinpoints the interaction between individuals and between ethnic lifestyles, and I will discuss this further in chapter 10. Before that, I will consider another process that *increases* both competition for aesthetic dominance in weddings as well as the *intensity* of instances of aesthetic dissonance. This process also perpetuates previous linkages between “cosmopolitan” lifestyles and higher levels of economic wealth (Kong and Yeoh 2003), and exposes the connections that socially aspirational individuals make with certain kinds of ethnic lifestyles on display in weddings.

Chapter 9: Ethnic Taste, Everyday Commercial Activities and the Commercially Dominant Wedding Aesthetic

Introduction and Overview

In this chapter I will show how ethnic taste is shaped by commercial interests and activities. I will argue that everyday commercial activities like marketing, producing, selling and consuming contribute to and perpetuate pre-existing links between certain ethnic lifestyles of Chinese Singaporeans and levels of economic wealth. These links involve an association between “cosmopolitan” ethnic lifestyles and high economic wealth, and “heartlander” ethnic lifestyles and low economic wealth - they were established through various historical, social and political processes, and are covered in detail in Chapter 7 (*A Snapshot of Socially Prominent Ethnic Lifestyles*) and Appendix 7A. These links are made effectual in weddings through the adherence, subscription to and promotion of a *commercially dominant wedding aesthetic* that embraces ethnic identifications closely associated with “cosmopolitan” lifestyles.

I will argue that the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic is promoted through the *valorisation* and *idealisation* of aesthetic markers closely related to “cosmopolitan” lifestyles by both professional *institutions* and *individuals*. I will show how this happens through two significant processes. One, through a glamorisation of “cosmopolitan” aesthetic makers like bridal gowns in *luxury bridal studios and image professionals*, and conversely a relegation of other “heartland” aesthetic markers to lower-cost Chinese wedding shops. Two, through an idealisation of “cosmopolitan” material environments that occur through *overseas pre-wedding photography* and wedding banquets which act as *theatres of ethnic taste*, allowing for a brief moment for bridal couples to live a scripted “cosmopolitan” performance.

Links between economic wealth and Singaporean Chineseness are significant because they suggest that instances of aesthetic dissonance amongst Chinese Singaporeans are arranged along economic fault lines. Individuals who subscribe to the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic create and conform to *aesthetic norms* for weddings, leading to an increased level of competition for aesthetic dominance (see chapter 8) with other wedding participants, especially their elders. This increased level of competition for aesthetic dominance *accentuates* the degree of aesthetic dissonance, further confronting each individual with taste decisions. Combined with a commercialised, idealised and valorised notion of “cosmopolitan” lifestyles, many young and economically aspirational Chinese Singaporeans choose to steer their trajectories towards such lifestyles, and in doing so create deeper social distances

between themselves and the contrasting, “heartlander” lifestyles they perceive to be connected to living poorly.

Such taste decisions carry wider implications for Chinese Singaporeans. As the commercialisation of aesthetic markers grows, individuals who have previously been economically and socially excluded because of their ethnic lifestyles will find it increasingly difficult to gain wealth or create social intimacies with other individuals. This is particularly apparent amongst Chinese Singaporeans who have glocalised (Hall 1991) themselves in response to what they see as “undesirable” lifestyles stemming from globalisation, particularly those from the West. These individuals tend to be first and second generation Chinese Singaporean migrants who made an actual journey from China to Singapore. As time progresses, newer migrants, especially those from China whose ethnic lifestyles bear resemblance to “heartlander” lifestyles, will encounter disproportionate barriers to economic progress and social mobility.

Mapping a Commercially Dominant Wedding Aesthetic

Weddings are often studied as events of *conspicuous consumption*, regardless of geographical location, individual status or “culture” (Bloch, Rao and Desai 2001, Grimes 2000, Mead 2007). Because of this, weddings have also become highly commercialised, as individuals and institutions seek to gain profits from an increasing demand for goods and services (Grimes 2000, Otnes and Pleck 2003). The result of this commercialisation is that professionals, both individual and institutional, have created what I call a *commercially dominant wedding aesthetic*. The commercially dominant wedding aesthetic is *a set of commercially produced ethnic identifications and aesthetic markers that are most commonly and repeatedly observed at weddings*. It is scripted, standardised and templatised, a conventional way in which the large majority of Chinese Singaporeans comport themselves in during a wedding. The commercially dominant wedding aesthetic in Singaporean Chinese weddings is characterised by a subscription and adherence to “cosmopolitan” ethnic lifestyles - wearing outfits normally associated with “Western” weddings (Winge and Eicher 2003) like white gowns, bridesmaid dresses and formal suits; participating and adapting activities associated with “Western” weddings like cutting a cake, pouring champagne down a tower of glasses, and engaging in rituals that mimic Anglo-American Christian wedding rites.

The commercially dominant wedding aesthetic promotes aesthetic dissonance by influencing the ethnic tastes of consumers (especially younger Chinese Singaporeans) towards “cosmopolitan lifestyles”. This is done through two significant processes. The first is a *valorisation* of “cosmopolitan” aesthetic markers. This is achieved both in the retail marketing of such markers as items of conspicuous consumption, as well as through the actions of image professionals creating wedding imagery that position them as significant and special

high-worth items. The second is an *idealisation* of non-local material environments, especially those associated with “cosmopolitan” lifestyles. This is done through positioning the bridal couple in non-local-locations to make taste performances, as well as in theatrical stagings of “cosmopolitan” ethnic tastes in high-end luxury wedding banquets.

Valorising Aesthetic Markers of “Cosmopolitan” Lifestyles

Luxury Bridal Studios

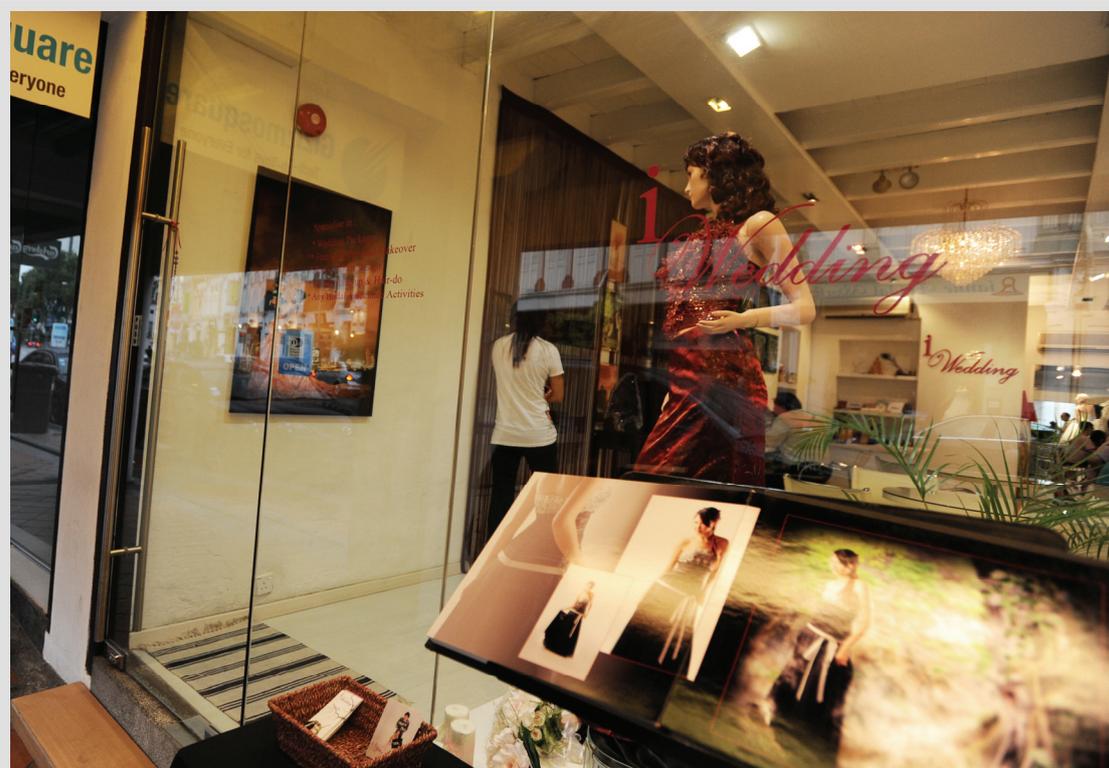
Luxury bridal studios are defined as commercial institutions that occupy a high-end, high-cost segment of the wedding market in Singapore. Luxury bridal studios are the retail face and physical embodiment of the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic. They valorise specific wedding artefacts (aesthetic markers) that form part of the allure of a “cosmopolitan” lifestyle by connecting them to performances of “cosmopolitan” ethnic tastes. This is achieved by creating a brand image of opulence and ostentation in their shopfronts, the aesthetic markers they sell and their pricing strategies.

In the Central Business District (CBD) of Singapore is a neighbourhood known as Tanjong Pagar. This area consists of karaoke bars, restaurants, and most notably the highest concentration of bridal studios in Singapore. Each studio normally occupies a small ground floor unit in a converted conservation shophouse¹. Bridal studios are typically adorned with white wedding gowns (not Chinese *kua*) and large photographs of bridal couples. The shops are brightly lit, designed with a minimalist style, and echo the feel of luxury and opulence. Their shop names are more often than not in English, named after their owners (Vaughn Tan) or things associated with weddings (The Aisle, My Dream Wedding), and none have Romanised Chinese names. Others resonate with a European-sounding name (La Belle, Signoria Nuzialia), as if to evoke an association with white “Western” weddings.

Bridal studios achieve this valorisation by adopting a commercially dominant wedding aesthetic that embraces ethnic identifications from “cosmopolitan” lifestyles. This wedding aesthetic extends into the brand image that bridal studios try to create by shaping their interior décor, which is often minimalist, sanitised and “Westernised”. The markers that make up this kind of wedding aesthetic include wedding costumes, the bridal car and pre-wedding photography. The Chinese *kua* is marginalised in these shops, relegated to being a rental piece worn and re-worn by numerous customers, whereas the white gown is privileged as something of far greater value and unique to each bride. Hired cars for the wedding day are luxury European brands, and are often restricted to Mercedes-Benz, BMW or Jaguar. Pre-

¹ Ironically, these studios are located just adjacent to Singapore’s Chinatown, making them part of the state’s efforts in revitalising the city centre according to its own interpretations (see chapter 2).

wedding photography, if not carried out overseas, is performed in areas that espouse locales reminiscent of temperate countries.



Monthly rentals for ground floor conservation shophouse units in Tanjong Pagar are one of the highest amongst commercial properties in Singapore

Achieving such a wedding aesthetic is usually an expensive endeavour and doing so sometimes requires bank loans and drawing upon credit. Agnes, 32, a wedding planner, related an incident involving her client's wedding banquet at one of Singapore's premier hotels

“There was this guy who spent so much that at the end of the banquet the *ang bao* (monetary gifts from guests and family) could not cover the cost². Then his credit cards could not cover the balance, so he had to go ask his friend to help him. It was terrible.” Agnes

The costs of such wedding aesthetics means that these aesthetic markers are increasingly occupying the mid to high end of the wedding market, meaning that these goods also take on an ostentatious value – possessing and using them becomes both a taste performance as

² The *ang bao* wedding banquet dynamic is a gamble that some bridal couples take where they hope that whatever they've spent on the banquet will be made up by *ang bao* from the banquet guests. It is normally polite to give enough to cover the cost of the banquet plus a little more, but this does not always happen.

well as status. Buying into this dominant wedding aesthetic is akin to buying into the *things* that individuals with a “cosmopolitan” lifestyle possess and consume – the status of travelling overseas, of having a diasporic space that encompasses “Western” ethnic identifications. In other words, such aesthetic markers become intrinsically associated with conspicuous consumption (Grimes 2000), and individuals who wish to engage in conspicuous consumption will look to these aesthetic markers first as a way of showing their wealth and status.

By occupying these segments of the market and establishing their dominance in generating a commercial wedding aesthetic, luxury bridal studios also inadvertently “crowd-out” other commercial institutions selling different styles of aesthetic markers. This is most evident in the presence of “Chinese wedding shops” that have found themselves relegated to the low-cost, low-end segment of the market. By being positioned in and positioning themselves this way, Chinese wedding shops unintentionally perpetuate links between “heartlander” ethnic lifestyles and low levels of economic wealth.

Chinese Wedding Shops

Chinese wedding shops are defined as commercial institutions that produce, market and sell wedding artefacts that can be historically attributed to and derived from regional sources in China. In popular discourse they are also called “traditional wedding shops” because the aesthetic markers found in these shops belong to what is archetypically considered Chinese, and because their owners espouse ethnic identifications that emphasise a sense of continuity and preservation of practices and rituals from China. Likewise, Chinese wedding shops also portray themselves as protectors of purist, region-specific notions of Chineseness – there are Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese wedding shops, each catering to the practices and idiosyncrasies brought over by migrants from different provinces of China.

Chinese wedding shops by virtue of their branding, location and goods achieve the converse of what luxury bridal studios do – their position in the market is one lacking in glamour, conspicuous consumption and all the things associated with “cosmopolitan” lifestyles. One who consumes aesthetic markers from Chinese wedding shops does not appear to be not drawing ethnic identifications from a wider, global diasporic space, but from a past of poverty-stricken migration and lower living standards, a past that many Chinese Singaporeans would rather imagine had not happened. A socially aspiring young Chinese Singaporean does not want to be reminded of her ancestor’s low economic wealth in her wedding – consuming these markers establishes a journey of difficulty and poverty, and in a way acts as a return to that poverty.

Just around the corner from Tanjong Pagar is Singapore’s Chinatown, an historical sector set aside by the British colonial administration where first-generation Chinese migrants arriving

into Singapore congregated and interacted. In an old shopping complex is a Chinese wedding shop known as *Tiong Poh* – run by Irene and her husband. Irene is the main salesperson in the shop, happy to answer questions about rituals and practices in Mandarin, whilst her husband sits quietly on the other side of the shop crafting large wedding lanterns for sale. The shop, like many others, lacks the pretension of luxury and opulence that the bridal studios down the road exude. They exist simply as vendors of quasi-religious artefacts, with little effort made in marketing, save for the odd newspaper article on a pillar.



Not So Bling?

Tiong Poh exemplifies many Chinese wedding shops in Singapore – they are located in a “heartland” sector, normally on the ground floor of HDB flats. Their clientele are varied, but cater largely to parents of bridal couples who wish to make their wedding more “Chinese”, and their goods are inexpensive. Profit is important to some but to Irene it does not appear to be her main motivational factor. What is more important is the preservation of things they consider to be “Chinese”. As Irene put in (in Mandarin)

“These things (rituals, artefacts, practices) are things that should be done. We are Chinese people after all, it’s tradition.” Irene

However, retailers like Irene face a problem of selling non-luxurious goods, their profit margins seemingly lower than their high-end counterparts. Apart from the tea set that needs to be used a tea ceremonies, many other aesthetic markers sold appear to work in

dissonance with the more luxurious offerings from bridal studios. Their wares are bright red in colour, often with gold lettering, both of these being auspicious colours (Tan 2001). Their retail location in the heartlands, use of Mandarin and dialects as a business medium, aesthetics of goods sold and brand image all contribute to their association with a “heartlander” ethnic lifestyle. In other words, their position in the market cements aesthetic markers related to “heartland” Singaporean Chineseness with notions of low economic wealth. Economists term such goods “inferior goods” – items that are bought less as individuals get wealthier (Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1998:106). It is not as straightforward as this, but the term does well to encapsulate the sentiment that many bridal couples have about the goods sold by Chinese wedding shops and the rituals related to these goods.

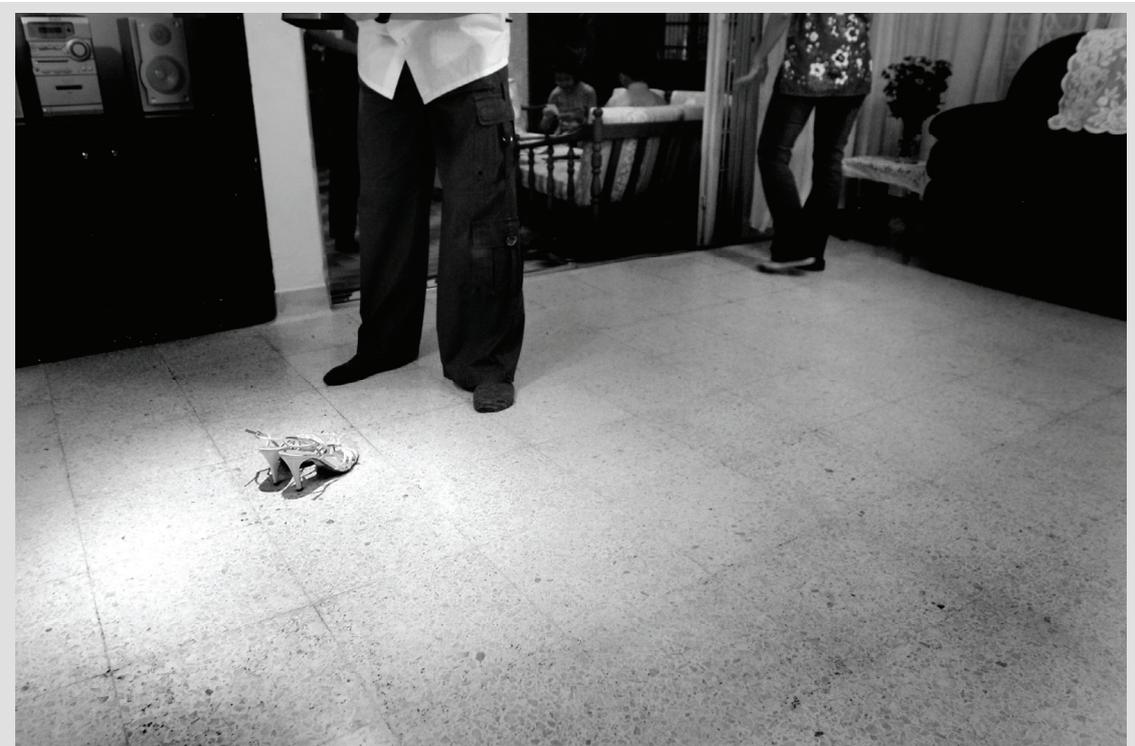
Luxury bridal studios and Chinese wedding shops create physical spaces of wedding aesthetics, both commercially dominant and commercially marginalised. However, the valorisation of “cosmopolitan” aesthetic markers extends much deeper into the wedding itself. Professional individuals wield significant influence on the wedding day proper in the area of creating utopian imageries of aesthetic markers, both increasing their position as artefacts of conspicuous consumption and their relative importance to the wedding as “mandatory” items.

Image Professionals and Aesthetic Markers

Wedding professionals like the photographer, videographer, wedding planner, banquet manager and wedding car driver are instrumental in shaping ethnic tastes *during the wedding* by perpetuating links between ethnicity and economic wealth through subscriptions to the dominant wedding aesthetic. For the purpose of this thesis I will focus my analysis on wedding photographers and videographers, collectively termed “image professionals”, because these individuals usually have the longest and most intimate amount of contact with wedding participants during the wedding.

Image professionals at weddings promote the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic by creating utopian images that valorise “cosmopolitan” aesthetic markers and “cosmopolitan” taste performances (I will deal with the latter in the next section when I discuss an idealisation of “cosmopolitan” places). These occur in the rituals orchestrated and staged before and during the wedding, but especially so in the visual documentation of wedding artefacts. Aesthetic markers related to “cosmopolitan” lifestyles like wedding shoes, jewellery, the white gown and the wedding bands are elevated and valorised by the image professional. This places the aesthetic marker in a different context, such that its connection to both the dominant wedding aesthetic and a “cosmopolitan” ethnic lifestyle is emphasised. Image professionals achieve this by exaggerating the aestheticity of a marker in their images, transforming it from mundane object to magical artefact.

Documenting aesthetic markers this way involves actively moving and staging the marker so that it is portrayed in a way that supports and emphasises its aesthetic. Markers are often skilfully moved and adjusted by photographers so that they are captured from the best possible angle. A commonly occurring image that appears frequently in wedding photo albums is one where wedding bands are interlinked and laid over a photograph of the bridal couple, each band circling a respective face. Video cameras sweep in slow-motion over the curves of the white wedding gown and the luxury bridal car. Most of these images eschew the environment that these aesthetic markers exist in, preferring close-up, tight crops of the marker. At Kenzie (27, Police Officer) and Tze Ling's (25, Occupation Unknown) wedding, their videographer systematically took pieces of Tze Ling's outfit from her bedroom upstairs to various parts of the house to create short clips which would later be spliced into their wedding video.



Above: Radiance

This “style” of image making also generates opportunities for taste performances, as images of aesthetic markers become an integral part of a bridal couple’s wedding album, to be displayed to friends, family and guests after the wedding. At a wedding I co-photographed with another professional, Colin, I asked him why he chose to photograph certain generic wedding decorations like candles, given that they were re-used at every wedding banquet in the venue. Colin told me how photographs of these mundane artefacts made good backdrops to his photo-collages, which allowed him to gain greater profits by charging for the additional labour needed to lay out the photographs. Colin’s skill as a layout artist and photographer

allowed him to accentuate these commercially produced aesthetic markers at a five-star hotel and make them part of a bridal couple's taste performance.

These photographic techniques of elevating "cosmopolitan" aesthetic markers and co-opting them into a prominent position in individuals' taste performances mean that such aesthetic markers take on a central and significant position in individuals' weddings. This is evidenced by the increasing number of bridal couples who supply "tear-sheets" to wedding photographers. No longer are they comfortable with giving photographers full autonomy over what they photograph, bridal couples are now beginning to take greater control over the contents of their wedding albums. Tear-sheets are itemised lists of artefacts and actions that professional photographers are expected to photograph, especially the bride's wardrobe. This suggests that specific items are deemed important and desirable enough to be included in a visual inventory of the wedding. In other words, utopian images of "cosmopolitan" aesthetic markers are now *expected* to be present in the final deliverables.

The commercially dominant wedding aesthetic does not just affect ethnic taste through the items and things that individuals produce, market, sell or buy. It also affects the way we see, like and dislike ethnic lifestyles by influencing our perceptions of the material environments that we dwell in. In the next section, I will deal with how professionals idealise certain landscapes and material environments as part of their subscription to the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic, and how this affects individuals' ethnic tastes.

Idealising "Cosmopolitan" Environments

Overseas Pre-Wedding Photography

Overseas pre-wedding photography subscribes to a commercially dominant wedding aesthetic by glamorising stereotypical material environments associated with "cosmopolitan" lifestyles and especially "Western" aesthetic markers. Professional wedding photographers offer packages where bridal couples will travel in groups of five pairs or more to an overseas location - often Paris, Venice, Rome, London, Sydney, Seoul, or Las Vegas. Each couple would then spend a day with the photographer having their photographs taken. The resulting album is displayed during a pre-wedding-banquet drinks reception for guests to peruse. More recently it has also become popular for bridal couples to project these photographs onto a large screen in the wedding banquet hall as a rotating slideshow.

Overseas pre-wedding photography is often seen as a taste performance that embraces "cosmopolitan" ethnic lifestyles. Whilst all pre-wedding photography are taste performances, the deliberate effort made in travelling overseas and the associated high costs gives overseas pre-wedding photography a more explicit veneer, especially because of its suggestions of

economic wealth, and because of its position as an aesthetic marker to be *displayed* for guests at a wedding. Individuals who partake in such shoots do so to differentiate themselves from other individuals who have had their pre-wedding photographs taken in Singapore. When I asked Elwyn (29, Programmer), whose wedding I photographed in 2007, why friends would choose to have their photographs taken in a place they had no emotional nor historical connection to, she answered

“They (bridal couples who go overseas) want something different to show people (sic) at the wedding, something that’s not Singapore. They want to be different from other couples.” Elwyn

Pre-wedding photography in general is deliberately contrived and staged to present a hyper-romantic version of a couple’s relationship. What makes *overseas* pre-wedding photography significant is the veneer of glamour that is afforded by these photographs. Pre-wedding photography conducted overseas adds a layer of exoticity that involves bridal couples comporting themselves as consumers of “cosmopolitan” or “Westernised” aesthetic markers. Professional photographers create an *idealised* image-world (Sontag 1977) of “cosmopolitan” lifestyles, displacing individuals out of their mundane material environments into a more glamorous and staged situation. These image-worlds are formed through a photographic focus on landscapes and landmarks that are distinctively *not* in Singapore.

Overseas pre-wedding photography tends to focus on two main themes – the bridal couple and their location. The former is intuitive, but the latter is privileged a great deal, almost to the point location overshadows the bride and groom. Kelvin Koh, a wedding photographer noted for overseas pre-wedding photography, regularly organises shoots in Paris and other European locations³. The photographs mundanely depict romanticised and idealistic notions of relationships and marriage, but there is a deeper underlying ethnic subtext to their content. This subtext is an association and connection of human subject to famous landmark. Whether it is the Eiffel tower, the Acropolis in Greece or padi fields in Bali, bridal couples are placed strategically next to, in front of, or engaging with places, spaces and artefacts that exude an exoticity of “non-local-locale.” This subtext is also apparent in other photographers’ works that consist of overseas shoots involving Chinese Singaporean couples, like John Lim⁴ and CK Hwang⁵.

³ LightedPixels is a Singapore-based luxury wedding photography studio www.lightedpixels.com

⁴ John Lim Photography www.johnlimphotography.com

⁵ 39 East Studios www.39east.com



Any Place but Home⁶

Pre-wedding overseas photography act as evidence (for the bridal couple and their peers) that the bridal couple's social trajectories are steered towards a "Westernised", glamorised ethnic lifestyle, popularised through media channels (Mead 2007). The photographs also concretise their experience and journey, and establish that they were indeed part of a "non-local-locale". This image-world suggests that the subjects are no longer bound to the diasporic journeys of their migrant grandparents. Instead, they are free to create new and individualised journeys that embody a set of ethnic identifications wider than the personal diasporas of first or second generation migrant Chinese Singaporeans.

By generating these image-worlds of idealised and glamorised "cosmopolitan" lifestyles and letting bridal couples comport themselves as temporary lifestyle migrants whose social trajectories are directed towards "cosmopolitan" stereotypes, overseas pre-wedding photography deepens the contrast that bridal couples perceive between their temporal image-world and the mundane world they inhabit in their everyday lives. This can apply during the wedding, but is most noted in the "post-wedding" effect, where brides often complain of the banality of everyday life after the high of a wedding⁷. Perceptions of contrast mean that it is more likely that bridal couples will experience a sense of aesthetic dissonance between what they embraced in their pre-wedding photography, and what they are faced with in the wedding, especially with regards to non-"cosmopolitan" aesthetic markers.

The idealisation of "cosmopolitan" environments in pre-wedding photography and the valorisation of "cosmopolitan" aesthetic markers by bridal studios both tend to take place

⁶ Elwyn (29, programmer) and Lucas (31, systems analyst) are Chinese Singaporeans who have lived in the UK for several years and have permanent leave to remain. Although their pre-wedding photographs were located in a country they resided this, this "style" of image is typical of photographs taken by couples making temporary trips abroad for their pre-wedding photography – evidence of a non-local locale.

⁷ <http://www.singaporebrides.com/cgi-bin/forumboard/show.cgi?tpc=1&post=365793#POST365793>

before the wedding, where bridal couples make taste decisions as to how the wedding will eventually be conducted, and how they will comport themselves. However, the influence of professional institutions and individuals carries on into the wedding, where the prevalence and persistence of the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic means that both professionals and individuals have their ethnic tastes shaped and steered towards “cosmopolitan” ethnic lifestyles.

Theatres of Ethnic Taste

As every other girl, I yearn to look my best, to be beautiful and princess-like for that one special day. Dreaming of a dazzling entrance into the Grand Ballroom with my prince charming on my right, the banquet venue is definitely at the top of my to-do list. With high spirits, my hubby and I started on our wedding hotel “hunt” only to be vexed with the limited choices constrained by our budget. Marriott, I am humbly going down on a bended knee and proposing that you grant me my wish of the best fairy-tale wedding ever!” – Swee Suan Chiew’s winning entry for the Singapore Marriott all-expense paid dinner competition⁸

Whilst image professionals venerate “cosmopolitan” aesthetic markers through their imagery, other professionals create and perpetuate material environments in which conspicuous consumption is linked to the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic. Where displays of status in weddings used to be a family and kinship effort in Singapore (Freedman 1957), they have now also become commercialised into *theatres of ethnic tastes*. This is no better shown than in the wedding banquet industry where professional institutions provide everything an individual needs to espouse “cosmopolitan” tastes for one evening. Such affordances provided to individuals means that economic hierarchies can be suspended for one brief moment, albeit artificially and in favour of one kind of aesthetic.

The wedding banquet industry is largely focussed on providing a luxurious experience geared towards an idealistic, glamorised “cosmopolitan” lifestyle. Wedding banquet halls, especially those occupying the mid to high-end of the market, are designed and decorated to be in line with the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic. In five-star hotels these are normally the hotel’s ballroom, and are generously adorned with flower arrangements, candles, satin weaves and wedding favours. In some hotels bridal couples choose their decorations by theme, with packages with names like “garden fantasy” or “eternal bliss”.

The banquet itself is *especially* performative and *deliberately* theatrical. Veron (F, 27, Bride) and Zach (M, 30, Groom) are a Chinese Singaporean couple who held their banquet in a five star hotel in Singapore in 2005. Theirs was a typical example of how wedding banquets are

⁸ <http://www.singaporebrides.com/features/article100716.htm>

scripted. They had two walk-in's under a spotlight in a darkened room with dry-ice smoke paving a red carpet. On the first occasion they ascended a raised stage to cut a fake styrofoam six-tier wedding cake with a pre-cut notch. On the second occasion they ascended the stage again to pop open a champagne bottle, releasing the pressurised cork into the air, and pouring it over a champagne glass tower, before locking arms to share what the master of ceremonies termed a "love toast". Speeches were made, predictably thanking their parents for raising them, their guests for coming, and professing undying love for each other. At different points of the banquet, slide shows of the bridal couple growing up and falling in love were screened, along with video highlights from the morning rituals.



It all looks the same to me

The most significant aspect of the wedding banquet industry is that it does not discriminate in the portrayal of its clients. While image-making in an individual's home may betray the different material environments of the bridal couple and hence their possible positions in the economic hierarchy, the wedding banquet acts like a real-time version of overseas pre-wedding photography by displacing the bridal couple *and* their families *and* their friends from their quotidian existences. In other words, it is a temporary suspension of an individual's economic situation (especially those lower in the economic hierarchy) and a denial of the mundane. In this sense the wedding banquet hall and the event itself becomes a theatre in which performances of taste are played out for the benefit of the bridal couple, their parents, their peers and their parents' peers. It is a place and space for individuals to vicariously role-play in an idealised "cosmopolitan" lifestyle, subscribing to the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic.

This process was evidenced in Andrea and Cameron's wedding. If we recall from chapter 8 (*Participant Intervention and Social Distancing*), Andrea and Cameron were white-collared professionals, but not educated to a degree level. Andrea's family lived in what could only be described as an economically less well-off area of Singapore. Her one bedroom, 500 sq ft flat housed five individuals – mattresses were stacked high on foldable metal beds. The kitchen floor still bore its original raw concrete finish from thirty years ago. There was no sofa, only red plastic chairs and simple fold-out table to provide snacks for the bridal party. Cameron's home was less stark, but neither did it espouse any luxury other than basic necessities.

None of this made a difference at their wedding banquet held later in the evening. They had chosen a restaurant in a five star hotel resort with an international brand name, their wedding portrait displayed proudly at reception was as large as any other wedding I had attended. Like Veron and Zach's wedding banquet, all the trappings were present, including the cake, dry ice, champagne tower and wedding videos. For this one moment, they were just like any other bridal couple in their own theatre staging their own play. This was *not* a status claim, it was *not* to show that they possessed more wealth than they really had. Rather, it was a script of behaviour that they saw as a necessary part of the wedding, and by playing their role, their everyday lives and positions in the social and economic hierarchy were temporarily superseded in favour of the performance.

Such role-play means that the wedding banquet is not *just* a display of social status or economic wealth, as other scholars have noted of similar rituals amongst other social groups (Edwards 1987, Grimes 2000). It is also an opportunity for everyone at the wedding, not just the bridal couple, to indulge in luxury. However, such indulgence in this idealised "cosmopolitan" setting also serves to contribute to individuals' perception of the connections between luxury goods and "cosmopolitan" lifestyles. If all five-star banquet halls look this way, if all "nice" wedding banquets are carried out like this and if the corresponding costs tend to place these experiences in the high-end of the market, then the aesthetics of the experience become inextricably linked to the experience itself. This is particularly so amongst individuals who harbour social and economic aspirations. In the next section I will show how the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic is being translated by some individuals into aesthetic norms that they strive to implement in their wedding, resulting in aesthetic dissonance with other aesthetic markers put forward by other participants.

Conclusion: Aesthetic Conformity and Aesthetic Dissonance

The prevalence and dominance of the commercial wedding aesthetic has sometimes led consumers to conform to group norms and practices, which in this case appears to be a translation of the commercial aesthetic into a practised *aesthetic norm*. Unlike scripts of behaviour (Appiah and Gutmann 1996), this aesthetic norm is not a set of hard and fast rules handed down by socially or politically dominant individuals. Instead, it is a combination of factors involving the actions of professional institutions and individuals, the everyday interactions between individuals, and the aspirations of the individuals in question that come together to create an aesthetic norm.

The formation of an aesthetic norm amongst peers is characterised by information-sharing within social networks. Married individuals “pass down” knowledge to soon-to-be married individuals, either through physical social networks, or increasingly through the internet. Individuals disseminate timetables and documents that templatise a wedding’s sequence. No single individual is an authority in this case, but individuals who *appear* to have the most expertise are the most trusted. In a previous study on wedding websites in Singapore (Heng 2007), I discovered that brides were communicating via forum postings and emailing each other their wedding timetables, item checklists and photographic tear-sheets (itemised list of aesthetic markers and events to photograph). Individuals appeared to adopt a copy-and-paste attitude towards their wedding, sometimes using the documents in their entirety. As one bride, Jacinta (25, Occupation Unknown), whose wedding I photographed in 2006, confessed to me when her husband In Loong (26, Engineer) emailed me a highly detailed tear-sheet.

“Actually we weren’t really bothered about what you photographed or what you didn’t. We just got the item list (tear-sheet) from our friends and thought that you might find it useful.” Jacinta

Personal social and economic aspirations also affect an individual’s reaction to aesthetic norms. In the case of weddings, individuals who aspire to economic or social status are more likely to steer their social trajectories towards “cosmopolitan” lifestyles because of the conspicuous consumption patterns that wedding professionals have created links with. In this way, such individuals will tend to create social intimacies with “cosmopolitan” lifestyles by consuming “cosmopolitan” aesthetic markers. These individuals’ ethnic tastes have thus been influenced in a direction that takes them *towards* “cosmopolitan” ethnic lifestyles. Conversely, these individuals may find that other, non-“cosmopolitan” aesthetic markers epitomised in “heartlander” lifestyles distasteful. This then explains the dislike that some bridal couples express at certain “heartland” aesthetic markers employed by their parents or elders, for example, the *yum seng* ceremony (see chapter 7: *Tensions between “Cosmopolitan” and “Heartlander” Lifestyles*).

Chinese Singaporeans who decide to conform to an aesthetic norm and contest for aesthetic dominance at their weddings sometimes do so with intense vigour, as Poppy (age unknown), an investment banker and bride-to-be told me once about her dream wedding

“I want a Vera Wang gown, the kind you have to fly to the United States to be measured for... I’m also planning for three photographers, one for me, one for my husband and one to photograph the general surroundings. I want it to be like a paparazzi of camera flashes in front of me.” Poppy

Poppy’s *ambitions* appeared to be a case of her steering her social trajectories towards a perceived lifestyle of idealised glamour and stardom, albeit a temporal one. Her desire to create a “Hollywood red-carpet” style wedding was symptomatic of bridal couples who sought to display or achieve status by conforming to aesthetic norms derived from the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic.

Aesthetic norms and a commercially dominant wedding aesthetic increasingly problematise the interactions between individuals espousing different ethnic lifestyles in a wedding. Conforming to the aesthetic norm means an *increased level of competition for aesthetic dominance* in a wedding (see Chapter 8: *Aesthetic Dissonance and Social Distancing amongst Chinese Singaporeans*). This increased level of competition stems from two issues, the first as I have pointed out is that many bridal couples choose to steer their social trajectories *towards* “cosmopolitan” lifestyles and *away* from “heartlander” lifestyles, because of the former’s connections with conspicuous consumption. The second issue is the steadfast adherence that *other* participants in the wedding have to non-“cosmopolitan” lifestyles. These individuals are not completely opposed to “cosmopolitan” lifestyles, and they are as conscious about conspicuous consumption as any other wedding participant. However, their ethnic tastes and ethnic lifestyles differ, sometimes markedly, from the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic. Like the Chinese wedding shop owner Irene, they are concerned with performing a rite of passage in a way that is “true” to their “heritage” and their “traditions”. In other words, these individuals cling on to their diasporic memories (real or imagined) of China and of *hsiang* (Lian 1995).

Such individuals appear to have a counter-reaction to flows of globalisation by localising themselves (Hall 1991). Glocalisation involves a suspicion and rejection of cultural forms brought from other parts of the world, and a more vigorous protection of the “local” cultural forms that appear to be under threat from globalisation. Chinese Singaporeans who engage in glocalisation appear to restrict their diasporic spaces, treating forms of media and practices from the “West” with a degree of suspicion.

It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons that underlie acts of localism amongst Chinese Singaporeans, especially older ones. One possibility lies in the state's valorisation of Chineseness as a cultural ideal, whilst at the same time embracing the economic benefits of engaging with the "West". Political speeches by ministers in Singapore have tended to focus on a purified, homogeneous version of Singaporean Chineseness, emphasising primordialist links with China (Lee 1993). At the same time, compulsory language classes for ethnic groups, aptly named "Mother Tongue", reinforces the idea that there are certain specific and unchanging characteristics of being Chinese Singaporean. Kim, 63 and semi-retired, is a mother of a recently-married bride. She recounted to me how in her everyday life she was randomly chided by a woman because being Malaysian Chinese, she was not taught to speak Mandarin in school. She quoted the woman as saying

"The woman told me, 'How can you not speak Chinese? Our prime minister Lee Kuan Yew said that all Chinese people must speak Chinese'." Kim

But individuals who consciously tighten and restrict their personal diasporas through glocalisation have found themselves economically and socially disadvantaged. Like Chinese wedding shops, their social and economic relevance continue to diminish in the face of commercially dominant "cosmopolitan" lifestyles. It is these individuals who have found themselves the target of middle-class humour (Chua 2003), and who receive social tags like "heartlander" and whose ethnic lifestyles are derogatorily termed "Cheena". It is even more distressing when one realises that the social group of individuals most likely to fall into this situation are the ones whose hands laboured for a better life for younger Singaporeans, and who struggled to make the physical journey from China to Singapore, for it is these individuals who are the most vulnerable to changes in state policy, consumption patterns and aesthetic norms.

The significance and influence of commercial entities in the shaping of ethnic taste will continue to grow as aesthetic markers become commercialised and commoditised. There are



also wider implications for Chinese Singaporeans as an increased inflow of individuals from China with different ethnic lifestyles migrate into Singapore. The state risks another group of economically and socially excluded individuals replacing the ones who are slowly fading away, replicating the social distances already so apparent amongst local Chinese Singaporeans. In my concluding chapter I will analyse what the future challenges facing Singaporean Chineseness could be, and what if anything can be done about them.

Chapter 10: Conclusion – Aesthetic Dissonance, Ethnic Hybridity and Economic Life-Paths

Introduction and Overview

Throughout this thesis I have used a journey metaphor for ethnicity because I wanted to capitalise on the *vocabulary* of distances, trajectories and direction. This was so that I could build an understanding of the *mechanics* of aesthetic dissonance, ethnic lifestyles and ethnic taste. My final contribution is *the formation of aesthetic dissonance as a mechanism of transdiasporic ethnicity-making, exposing the importance of intense moments of aesthetic juxtaposition that occurs in everyday life*. In doing so I have been able to create a richer, more nuanced and more detailed explanation of ethnicity-making amongst diasporic individuals, situated firmly in their everyday *actions* and *aesthetics*. I am also able to take into account coercion and compromise as a distinct possibility in “hybridic” and “syncretic” ethnicity-making, and can now account for ethnicity’s role in a Chinese Singaporean’s life opportunities and aspirations.

In this chapter I will draw together my findings over the last 3 chapters, looking at aesthetic dissonance and what it says about ethnicity-making amongst diasporic individuals. I will argue that ethnicity is made at *points of interaction* between individuals and between individuals and their material worlds in moments of aesthetic dissonance. My work on aesthetic dissonance and commercial activities has shown that aesthetic markers, so important in ethnicity-making, have a *production phase* that is often ignored in favour of a focus on consumptive practices. Aesthetic dissonance also works as a way to understand ethnic hybridity in more detail and on a more personal level. I argue that ethnic hybridity can be seen as an ethnic lifestyle that is in a constant state of aesthetic dissonance – as researchers we must consider processes of coercion and compromise that lead to hybridity, rather than it simply being a form of political resistance (Ang 2001, Bhabha 1990) or a favourable symptom of globalisation (Kotkin 1992).

My study has also shown that acts of ethnicity-making are complexly intertwined with an individual’s economic life-path, defined here as her economic aspirations, consumption patterns and achievements. Commercialised productions of ethnicity expose the connections between wealth-making, socio-economic aspirations, conspicuous consumption and ethnicity. Aesthetic dissonance and social distancing is a practice that can work towards explaining the different levels of personal mobilities (social and economic) available to different individuals. I argue that a diasporic individual’s socio-economic mobility can be expressed as a problem of aesthetic dissonance and ethnicity-making in social distances. Doing this allows us to understand how ethnicity works amongst individuals who encounter difficulties in their migratory and economic journeys. I will then conclude by reflecting on the limitations of this thesis, further areas of study, and the visibility of the social.

Ethnicity is forged through Aesthetic Dissonance, in the *moments* and *flashpoints* of everyday encounters

Aesthetic dissonance is a result of contrasting and juxtaposed taste performances, and a process that forces individuals into making decisions about other individuals' ethnic lifestyles. The key element of aesthetic dissonance is that it occurs at *points of interaction* and often does so in intense ways. To borrow from Henri Cartier-Bresson, it captures the *decisiveness of the moment* where ethnicity is made. This suggests two inter-related issues. The first is that although ethnicity continues to be made routinely in everyday life, it is also made intensely in *flashpoints* of everyday life. In order for us as researchers to better understand ethnicity and its impact on the social realities of our informants, we need to look for the intense moments of interaction that occur between individuals and between individuals and their ethnic lifestyles. The second is that if we are to look for these moments, we have to locate ourselves in the lived experiences and worlds of our informants. This requires us to not just interact with them, but their aesthetic markers as well. However, although the material world is often acknowledged, our attention is often fixated on a limited aspect of an aesthetic marker's journey. I will deal with each in turn.

The decisiveness of the moments that aesthetic dissonance encapsulates is grounded in the *moments* and *flashpoints* of everyday encounters. Throughout this thesis I have made use of brief and intense encounters between individuals, aesthetic markers and taste performances to show how aesthetic dissonance works. Suan's act of seed showering on Amelia in chapter 7 (*Taste performances are explicit and outward-facing*) was an illustration of how taste performances could also be interpreted as an instance of aesthetic dissonance involving different aesthetic markers (red umbrella, white gown) juxtaposed against one another. This taste performance lasted all of five minutes before Amelia got into the car. Kim Huat's intervention in Andrea and Cameron's door games in chapter 8 (*Participant Intervention and Social Distancing*) was a potent example of individuals imposing their ethnic tastes onto others, but the intervention lasted less than three minutes. In both cases however the impact was there for one to witness - in the body language of the participants, in their comments made privately to me, and in visual aesthetic contrasts that could be read, photographed and interpreted.

Such intensity does not discount the more mundane moments of everyday life, because those are still important. However, even in these mundane moments, I propose that aesthetic dissonance can and does occur in subtle, hidden and nuanced ways. This was the case in Katie and Lim Huat's wedding dinner and luncheon in chapter 8 (*Aesthetic Territorialisation*), where guests were demarcated into different venues and different events, aesthetic dissonance existed as a phenomenon that was *feared* and *anticipated*. Its influence was there

even when its actual occurrence was deliberately avoided. Likewise, the contrast of Chinese wedding shops and bridal studios in Chapter 9 (*Valorising Aesthetic Markers of "Cosmopolitan" Lifestyles*) served to reinforce the contrast and juxtaposition of aesthetics in a geographical and territorialised manner. When these elements finally do come together in a wedding, the dissonance is all the greater.

The way aesthetic dissonance happens thus means that our understanding of how ethnicity is made is better served with us looking for and recognising *encounters* between taste performances. In other words, we must look for the mundane *and* the intense in everyday life. My study has shown that such explorations are well-served when one is located in the lived and tangible realities of one's informants. Although scholars (Knowles 2003, St Louis 2002) have argued for greater attention to be paid to the material in studies of race, studies into the aesthetic markers of race and ethnicity have often focussed on the *consumption* of artefacts. I argue that such a focus is limiting because aesthetic markers have a production phase as well.

The Production of Aesthetic Markers

Our everyday needs are increasingly fulfilled by commercial entities. In Singaporean Chinese weddings individuals buy more aesthetic markers than they make. In chapter 9 (*Overseas Pre-Wedding Photography*) I showed how bridal couples would travel overseas to create image-worlds (Sontag 1977) of their ethnic lifestyles, facilitated by a professional photographer or bridal studio that would organise the logistics of the trip. The act of making this image-world also results in a tangible aesthetic marker in the form of a wedding album that is displayed for guests at the wedding itself. At the same time, this is also an act of a photographer *producing* an aesthetic marker for the bridal couple and for other individuals to *consume*.

The *production* of an aesthetic marker is different from its use or consumption. This is the stage at which its constituent parts are assembled into a tangible whole. In chapter 9 (*Chinese Wedding Shops*), Irene's husband sat on one side of *Tiong Poh* patiently *assembling* wedding lanterns for sale. When I first walked in front of the shop to photograph it I also noticed how Irene was sat at her desk, stitching ribbons together for wedding door decorations. In my own professional practice my photographing of a wedding is part of a process that eventually results in a photo album that will act as an artefact of my informants' wedding.

The production phase is important because it entails as many decisions by a producer as a consumer who consumes or uses an aesthetic marker. For the purpose of this study, some of the more important decisions include how the artefact should *look* (its aesthetics) and *who*

would want to purchase it (whose *tastes* one is appealing to). An aesthetic marker may or may not reflect the ethnic tastes of its producer – in my own photography I stubbornly stick to a certain style, colour set and subtleness that positions me in a certain market segment, attracts a certain clientele, and exposes my own ethnic tastes as “cosmopolitan”. My website and corporate identity are a mix of black and white, both “inauspicious” colours according to Chinese superstitions (Chua 2003). I also found that my clients (key informants) were largely university graduates who were fluent in English (see Appendix 4B), and whose ethnic lifestyles often placed in a “cosmopolitan-heartlander” tension with their parents or grandparents’ ethnic lifestyles.

Understanding how an aesthetic marker is produced confers two distinct benefits. One, in seeing its production we can better understand why an aesthetic marker looks the way it looks. We can examine the decisions made by the producer – were they a reflection of her ethnic tastes, or were they a response to the demands of the market she was trying to sell her goods to? Why were they in the business of creating these markers? What does it say about their ethnic lifestyles? If we look again to *Tiong Poh* in chapter 9: *Chinese Wedding Shops*, I noted how Irene’s continued running of the business had less to do with profit, and more to do with a belief of her role as a preserver of “traditions”. Her production of aesthetic markers was a reflection of her ethnic lifestyle, one that she guards jealously. Two, looking at the life-path of an aesthetic marker exposes the social relationships and everyday lives that surround it in a more complete manner. In chapter 9: *Overseas Pre-Wedding Photography* I showed how a bridal couple and a photographer would work together in an overseas pre-wedding photoshoot to create an image-world of “cosmopolitanism”. Two producers in this case also became the consumers of the final product, which was weaved out of their relationship with a wedding professional. In the case of Singaporean Chinese weddings bridal couples who purposefully travel overseas to create a pre-wedding album are also inscribing their “cosmopolitan” desires and aspirations onto this aesthetic marker, which they will later consume after the wedding.

The production phase of an aesthetic marker implies that it is crucial that we understand an aesthetic marker *from the point that is made to the point that is consumed*. Aesthetic markers have their own life-paths and journeys. Along the way they expose the different ethnic tastes and social trajectories of the individuals that have contributed to their makeup. The wedding is an exceptional event where we can witness both production and consumption of aesthetic markers at the same time. Taste performances based around aesthetic markers give rise to different moments of aesthetic dissonance in the actions of individuals, the look of their dwelling space and the insignias on their body. Aesthetic dissonance, with its juxtaposed markers and performances can also suggest the appearance of hybridic or syncretic behaviour. This is not coincidental, and in the next section I will show how hybridity / syncretism can be understood as an instance of aesthetic dissonance.

Ethnic Hybridity and Aesthetic Dissonance

Hybridity is an often cited “benefit” of globalisation, a form of behaviour that celebrates the ability of individuals to adapt and create new cultural forms out of different and contrasting resources (Bhabha 1990). As such, hybridity amongst diasporic individuals or groups are also often seen as a form of political resistance against nation-state host societies (Bhabha 1994, Lavie and Swedenburg 1996). However, scholars have noted how hybridity can also be appropriated to oppress (Solomos and Back 1996), and that issues of hybridity could be meaningless because of the constant tension between the localities in which an individual dwells in and the ‘global’ (Smith 1990). Hybridity (or syncretism) *is* problematic for the reasons I expressed in chapter 2: *The Problem with Diaspora and Ethnic Hybridity*, and through my study I am able to offer a different reading of hybridity. I argue that *ethnic hybridity can be seen as an ethnic lifestyle that is in a state of constant aesthetic dissonance*.

Ethnic lifestyles that are in a state of constant aesthetic dissonance occur when an individual engages in taste performances that are aesthetically juxtaposed. These could be part of an individual’s comportment, ranging from different insignias on her body or different languages spoken, to name but two. A bride in a Singaporean Chinese wedding could be said to undergo aesthetic dissonance not just in the different jewellery she wears (as was the case of Cerlyn in chapter 8: *Aesthetic Dissonance is Multi-Scalar*), but also in the different gowns she dons throughout the wedding. Dwelling places also house similar dissonant practices. In the homes that I visited during my participant observation, I witnessed aesthetic markers pertaining to diasporic memories of journeys, peculiar localities and an embracing of global cultural forms. The cover photo of this thesis, showing a portrait of the Virgin Mary and a Chinese symbol for luck (*fu*), was in the home of Louis (29, Architect), whose family members were staunch Roman Catholics but also retained cultural practices from their diasporic journeys.

Such instances of dissonance could be a voluntary action, an act of compromise or an outcome of coercion. The most familiar of these in relation to hybridic practices are those that involve voluntary actions. An individual *chooses* to produce or consume juxtaposed or contrasting markers, perhaps wearing different insignias simultaneously. These actions best characterise the kind of resistance Bhabha (1990) was talking about in a “third space”. However, the other two warrant further attention, and are readily evidenced in practices by individuals in weddings.

Compromise and Coercion in Singaporean Chinese Weddings

In chapter 8: *Aesthetic Dissonance and Social Distancing amongst Chinese Singaporeans* I discussed how individuals negotiated and competed with each other over the aesthetic look of a wedding, terming this a competition for aesthetic dominance. These competitions are accentuated when individuals feel the need to conform to a certain style, usually because of peer or family pressure. Kim Huat's actions in Andrea and Cameron's wedding in chapter 8: *Participant Intervention and Social Distancing* was an example of how peer pressure can change a wedding in spontaneous and unexpected ways. However, peer pressure can also exist during the planning phase of a wedding, shaping consumption decisions and planned taste performances. Peer pressure suggests that some taste performances may be forced or coerced, and that some instances of aesthetic dissonance are a form of reluctant compromise between individuals engaged in competitions for aesthetic dominance.

Instances of aesthetic dissonance that arise from peer pressure and signal a degree of compromise can be observed in two aspects of a wedding. The first is the pliability of brides and grooms *during the* wedding itself. During my study I noticed that brides and grooms were particularly open to directions from other individuals, particularly when it came to rituals and ritualistic artefacts. They seemed to take a resigned approach to staged taste performances, following the scripts set out for them by their elders and other wedding professionals. Amelia and Jim¹ appeared to go through the motions in parts of their wedding at the directions of Suan and other older relatives. They neither questioned nor confronted Suan over her decisions and her taste performances, even if their body language suggested a sense of hesitance. Jim confessed that neither he nor Amelia knew what many of the wedding rituals they had just participated in meant. Jim said, "Actually we don't know what it means, we just do it (sic) for the sake of harmony". By harmony Jim meant that he wanted to reduce disagreements to a minimum, even if it meant doing things he neither understood nor desired to do.

The second is a subtle encroachment of ritualistic artefacts espousing "heartlander" lifestyles that texture "cosmopolitan" interior designed homes. These are most apparent in the new matrimonial homes of bridal couples, whose flats are designed to mimic minimalist Scandinavian interiors (another commercially dominant aesthetic) and whose furniture is often bought from Ikea. Owen (26, Army Officer) and Yin Lin (27, Food Technician) were married in 2004. Their new home was part of a newly built block of flats in the east of Singapore. It was furnished with a minimalist look, espousing beige, white and dark brown colour palettes. Yin Lin made an effort to point out 9 small squares of wood that acted as a decoration on the wall, created by Owen that "served no other purpose than to be art". Their bedroom was clean, bare and white, dominated by a large vanity mirror. But in that bedroom were three

¹ See Chapter 7: Taste performances are explicit and outward-facing

conspicuous items – a pair of red wedding lanterns giving off a red glow, a sticker of “*xi zhi*”² pasted high above the bed head, and on the dressing cabinet, a contemporary, if token gesture to the bridal trousseau (Wanyan 2008).

The contemporary Singaporean Chinese bridal trousseau is a token gesture to the trousseaus used in China (Wanyan 2008), but is a material form of diasporic memories carried over by immigrants (Gilroy 1991). The trousseau consists of items that a bride would need after the wedding when she would move in with her husband’s family – including a chamber pot, washbasin for the (eventual) baby, toiletries and towels, a sewing kit and so on. Today these items are all but obsolete, but remain in a toy-like, plastic form. The presence of the trousseau in this way is juxtaposed against the rest of Yin Lin and Owen’s décor. These items were put there at the behest of Owen’s mother, and like Jim and Amelia, they agreed.

Such compromise suggests that observable hybridic or syncretic activities or comportments may not be as harmonious as they appear to be. Beneath the veneer of “coherent” hybridity potentially lies a contentious and conflicting set of negotiations and increasing social distances. This also implies that we as researchers need to be perceptive to the dynamics in which instances of apparent hybridity take place – what kind of dominant relationships are going on? Is there coercion? Is there compromise and sacrifice? These questions need to be considered before any conclusions can be drawn about the aesthetic comportment and use of markers by individuals. In Singaporean Chinese weddings dominant and subservient relationships are complex and messy – parent-child relationships, peer pressure and societal norms all contribute to different instances of aesthetic dissonance and compromise amongst individuals. I will deal with this issue at the end of this chapter.

Seeing ethnic hybridity or syncretism in this way affords two important benefits to sociological research on diasporic individuals. One, it avoids the over-optimistic and celebratory tone that colours many studies of diasporic individuals. It opens a window onto instances of hybridity that can lead to social distancing rather than intimacy. Two, it exposes both the non-voluntary, coerced aspects of hybridity as well as grudging stalemates that occur in social relationships. Studies in hybridity often focus on voluntary actions, where individuals *choose* to create cultural forms. Aesthetic dissonance allows us to understand instances of cultural-borrowing (Back 1995) where choices are limited or sometimes non-existent.

Compromised or coerced ethnic lifestyles do not mean that no individual is able to create an ethnic lifestyle from various contrasting and conflicting sources. My point here is that comportment is not always voluntary, and even if it is, the juxtaposition of aesthetic markers still reveals itself as dissonant. It is up to us as researchers to understand whether such

² *Shuang xi* – a pairing of the Chinese word “happiness” that is a popular icon in Singaporean Chinese weddings

dissonance leads to social intimacies or social distances. In the next section I will explore the *consequences* of social distances that are created from aesthetic dissonance and from the connections between ethnic lifestyle and economic wealth that are perpetuated by everyday commercial activities.

Economic Life-Paths and Ethnicity-Making

An individual's economic life-path is defined here as an individual's economic aspirations, ambitions, consumption choices and achievements (gains and losses) over his or her lifetime. Commercialised activities in weddings expose the connections that these economic life-paths have with ethnicity-making. In this section I will argue that an individual's *economic life-paths significantly texture her journey of ethnicity-making and vice-versa*. Individuals in weddings who have strong economic aspirations (especially younger participants) appear to steer their social trajectories towards ethnic lifestyles (and individuals) associated with higher levels of economic wealth, which in turn distances them from ethnic lifestyles (and individuals) associated with lower levels of economic wealth. The result is that a *diasporic individual's economic mobility (defined as the ability to accrue economic capital) and social position in relation to other individuals can be explained as a problem of ethnicity-making and aesthetic dissonance*.

The connection between commercialism, economics and ethnicity has not been completely ignored. However, studies into these connections in relation to Chinese diasporic individuals are often focussed on the business networks and transnational movements of individuals (see Ang 2001, Ong 1995). Few studies consider the commercial aspect of everyday life and the shaping of one's Chineseness, with a few exceptions. Song's (1999) study of Chinese takeaways and children's labour in the United Kingdom for example demonstrated how the economic life-paths of family and kinship affected individuals' perceptions of their own Chineseness. However, links between diaspora, commercialism, aesthetic markers and ethnicity remain underexplored.

In chapter 9: *Aesthetic Conformity and Aesthetic Dissonance* I showed how the social and economic aspirations of individuals encouraged them to conform to aesthetic norms and a commercially dominant wedding aesthetic, such that in order to conspicuously consume, they would also embrace "cosmopolitan" ethnic lifestyles. This behaviour suggests that aspiration/ambition is significantly linked to ethnicity-making. An individual would comport herself in ways that would "fit" a conspicuous consumer – the brands of clothes she wears, the kinds of foods she eats, the language and slang she speaks and so on. The implication of this is that *ethnicity-making amongst diasporic individuals is not just about groupness / belonging or political activism / nationalism. It is also about the pragmatic, material and economic realities of everyday life*. It can be about profits and losses, wealth accrument and

conspicuous consumption. Ethnicity, as important as it is to an individual's way of interacting with others, can also be seen as a *by-product of an individual's journey of profiteering and material gain*. In other words, in our contemporary lives, *we make ethnicity as we seek both subsistence and luxury*.

This seeking of luxury is characterised in the conspicuous consumption of *aesthetic markers* and the *social emulation* of high-economic wealth individuals (Veblen 2005). Part of this social emulation also involves conspicuous leisure – “the ability to distance oneself from the dirty, sordid details of production through living a life of leisure...” (Paterson 2006:19). The commercialised wedding does many of these things (Otnes and Pleck 2003) and in Singaporean Chinese weddings both overseas pre-wedding shoots and wedding banquet becomes spaces where individuals can distance themselves temporarily from their working lives. The *aesthetic markers* they *create* and *consume* in these spaces also contribute towards making their ethnic lifestyles and shaping their journeys of ethnicity. By attempting to fulfil their aspirations, they are also defining their own understanding of what it means to be Singaporean Chinese.

The Economic and Social Consequences of Social Distancing amongst Chinese Singaporeans

During my participant observation, I noticed that as individuals consumed more of one set of markers, they desired less of another. As they created social intimacies with some lifestyles, other lifestyles were distanced. At the end of chapter 9 I mapped out how social distances are increasingly being created between “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” lifestyles. The result of this distancing does not just result in ethnicity being made, but it also affects the *future* economic and social well-being of distanced individuals. Their ethnic lifestyles become the “things to be distanced from”, the commercially non-dominant aesthetic, the *Cheena*, and so on. As they become distanced their networks shrink, as their networks shrink so do forms of social, economic and kinship support falter.

Scholars have found that this process is most evident amongst first or second generation Chinese Singaporeans who have found themselves displaced in their newly adopted locality (Kong and Yeoh 2003). As Singapore changed, their mobilities were activated for them. New streets and buildings were expressed in a new and unfamiliar language (Mandarin instead of a dialect); their media entertainment disappeared as dialect programmes were banned from the radio and television. Their children or grandchildren were educated in a language they had never learned (Kong and Yeoh 2003). Things changed economically as well, English became the business language and the domain of the well-educated and white-collared. And as these things happened, their social spaces continued to shrink.

Kinship support remains a crucial way for older Singaporean Chinese individuals as part of their everyday living. This is evidenced in weddings, which participants use as an opportunity to express their filial piety. When cups of tea are served during the tea ceremony, the oldest individual is often served first. Families also go out of their way to ensure the oldest participants are given due attention. Even for those who are invalid or in a vegetative state, the tea is still served and an *ang bao* is still given on their behalf. Juliet (24, Engineer) and Stanley (26, Engineer) were married in 2004. As part of the wedding they made a special stop to a small terraced house set deep into an upmarket residential area of Singapore. The house was old and unrenovated since its construction, but it was clean and neat. Inside the atmosphere was heavy and quiet. This was Stanley's grandmother's home and a home for a few more of his older relatives. Stanley's grandmother had been in a vegetative state for many years, and her body had wasted away. She was unresponsive to any stimuli, and her carer, Stanley's aunt, performed the ceremony on her behalf, before breaking down in tears. When the ceremony was over, I could see a sense of relief in Juliet's eyes. Similar instances are repeatedly displayed in weddings – the grandmothers / grandfathers of the bridal couple wait for their grandchildren to visit them to serve tea, they are sometimes brought to the family home, but are sometimes found in their own home, often a cluttered flat. They speak in dialects and wear clothes long out of fashion, harking back to the time they migrated from China. Their relevance only seems to come to light in the brief moment they receive a cup of tea. Beyond that, they tend to remain hidden and on the periphery of the action, content to make an odd comment and to rarely interfere (at least during the wedding itself).

Whilst moments of filial piety are touching, their emotional power also reveals and exposes the *difficulties*, *fears* and *isolation* these individuals experience *outside* of the wedding. These realities are exposed in their emotional landscapes, and my photography in the closing photo-collection following this chapter will reveal that emotional landscape in a visual and tangible manner. For now, the questions to ask are how did these individuals get to where they are? What continues to contribute to their daily economic difficulties? Could this happen to other groups or individuals espousing other kinds of ethnic lifestyles?

It is too easy to blame the state, as some individuals have over the years and continue to in anonymous and politicised blogs and websites³. But the perpetuation of social distancing arising from aesthetic dissonance has more to do with the everyday interactions of individuals than the supposed deterministic effects of state policy. As long as “cosmopolitan” lifestyles continue to be set up by commercial entities as something to be aspired to and to be socially emulated, individuals will continue to make ethnicity in such a way that individuals whose lifestyles do not conform to “cosmopolitanism” will be left out. As such, an individual's potential to accrue wealth over his or her lifetime, or potential to create meaningful social networks are strongly influenced by the ethnic lifestyles and ethnic tastes he or she espouses.

³ <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com> and <http://www.temasekreview.com>

In other words, *socio-economic exclusion amongst Chinese Singaporeans is partly explained by the nuanced differences in and interpretations of Chineseness, grounded in the visuality and the materiality of aesthetic markers.*

Future Areas of Research

“Mainland” Chinese Migrants in Singapore

Concepts of aesthetic dissonance, ethnic tastes and economic life-paths are useful in approaching both ethnicity-making as well as more mundane social situations in everyday life. In this section I propose that my findings can be applied to evolving social tensions between Chinese Singaporeans and “mainland” Chinese migrants who have recently arrived into Singapore over the last five years in increasing numbers. These migrants cover the socio-economic demographic, ranging from manual labourers to students to professional workers to businessmen (Yeoh 2007). Over the last few years both mainstream and internet media have placed a greater emphasis on mainland Chinese individuals who live, work and interact in Singapore (see Appendices 10A and 10B for examples). As I noted in my introductory chapter, established third or fourth generation Chinese Singaporeans often distance themselves from these new migrants in both discourse and practice. Such behaviour is not unique, as other social groups involving first and secondary waves of migration from similar points of departure also experience such tensions (Tuan 1998). However, evidence from newspaper reports, political discourse and public narratives online all point to a growing tension between locals and newly arrived migrants. These tensions are often focussed on Chinese manual labourers who, despite echoing the journeys made by first generation Chinese Singaporeans who were labourers themselves, appear to experience the greatest degree of social distancing, sometimes resulting in violence. As an article in the Straits Times (Singapore’s mainstream newspaper) recounts,

A relief cabby was fined \$3,000 on Wednesday for slapping and kicking a petrol station service attendant who had turned down his request to clean his vehicle windscreen... After refuelling the vehicle, Ng approached the victim and shouted: *'Chinaman, do you want to help me clean my window?'* Straits Times (2010, emphasis added, see Appendix 10A)

The relief taxi driver’s (who was himself a Chinese Singaporean) actions still appear to be rare in Singapore, but are symptomatic of the discontent expressed (anonymously) by other Singaporeans on blogs and websites (see Introduction). My contribution to Sociology in this aspect is that tensions between established and new migrants can be explained as a problem of aesthetic dissonance, ethnic taste, and social distances. In order to better approach these tensions, I propose that the following steps be taken. One, understand the aesthetic contrasts

and juxtapositions between the ethnic tastes and lifestyles of new immigrants and established locals. This involves mapping the socially prominent ethnic lifestyles of different individuals, like that of “cosmopolitan” or “heartlander” in chapters 7, 8 and 9. Specifically, researchers could consider (but not limit themselves to) the following aesthetic markers – speech, accent, language, dress, comportment, occupation, food consumed and transaction habits (how an item is purchased or sold).

Two, understand the economic relationships and life-paths of individuals from both groups across the socio-economic demographic. This is not necessarily the same as looking at *class*, because that might pre-determine the balance of relationships between individuals (Jenkins 1992). Rather, one might look simply at wealth and occupation, and how these characteristics may inform an individual’s attitude to another’s ethnic lifestyle. Three, map out the intensity and instances of encounters between individuals and between taste performances. One possibility for the tension which researchers can investigate is the speed at which migration from China has taken place. Through this study I have shown the importance of ethnicity being made in *flashpoints*. Rather than just considering the slowly unfolding and mundane processes of everyday life, researchers can also look into the short bursts of concentrated activity that texture our interactions as well. These can include commercial transactions, spontaneous aesthetic markers (like randomly posted flyers), the interaction between human and vehicular traffic, and so on.

Aesthetic Dissonance and Commercialised Ethnicity beyond Singaporean Chineseness

Whilst this study was based in Singapore and on specific groups of individuals in Singapore, I propose that my findings might have a broader resonance beyond Singaporean Chineseness⁴. For example, it may possibly be applied to concepts of the ethnic “look” of neighbourhoods (Soja 1997) to explain the impact the changing aesthetic architecture of an environment has on individuals living in them, both established locals and new (and established) migrants. Aesthetic dissonance could capture the point at which an individual decides that she does not like the environment she dwells in (Ingold 2000). It could explain why individuals might take steps to move out of neighbourhoods with an increased concentration of migration (Brâmă 2006), or the sociological significance of “ethnicised” areas (Hamnett and Butler 2010).

Commercialised productions of ethnicity could also reveal much about the way individuals make ethnicity at a time where much of what is consumed is purchased, and where these purchases can more easily be made from a variety of different geographic spaces. Aesthetic markers have themselves a diasporic journey, being transported over distances and

⁴ These suggestions in this section are preliminary and exploratory, and will need to be tested against empirical data in other situations.

transformed and adapted along the way (Gilroy 1991). Whilst they may have been transported by migrants who made diasporic journeys, they are just as easily available from traders who import and export them for commercial profit. This is not to say that such a practice is new, as international trade has existed in one form or another since individuals could travel. The difference now is the *ease* at which *some* individuals can buy their aesthetic markers. For example, Singaporeans regularly find a way to purchase goods from the United States that are not imported by wholesale traders by using Vpost, a service by the state post office. Such services allow an individualised form of aesthetic consumption and ethnicity-making. Globalisation may be a social (and in this case ethnic) story with economic consequences (Massey 1990), but these economic consequences also texture and shape the next chapter in that story.

Limitations

This thesis contains two important limitations. In my arguments I claimed that links between ethnicity and economic wealth contributed greatly to social distancing. However, these linkages are deeply textured by the historical circumstances of Singapore and the formation of Chineseness by state and individual alike. A colonial past, occupation by the Japanese military in World War II, expulsion from an ethnically-contrasting Malayan federation and holding a position as a Western ally in South-East Asia have all meant that unique productions of Chineseness pervades Singapore. This is important because it implies that ethnicity may or may not be linked to other hierarchies of power and dominance. And even if such links exist, it is still necessary to empirically ascertain individual attitudes towards wealth and social status. Singapore's rapid economic progress has been significantly supported by its citizen's economic aspirations and material culture. As then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said in a national day speech, "Life is not complete without shopping for Singaporeans" (See Chua 2003). How these aspirations work in other fields of study is something that warrants consideration when analysing ethnicity-making.

The second limitation in this study involves the methodological barriers required to complete my research in the way I have done. Investigating weddings in this thesis involved transforming my professional practice into social research – a process that leveraged on eight years of photographing weddings to achieve. Two issues are apparent here. The first is that the intimate knowledge I have of weddings, bridal couples and the relationships I have forged in weddings means that my study was a longitudinal exercise, requiring years of practice and positioning in the wedding industry. Other studies of Singaporean Chinese weddings can of course replicate this kind of insider knowledge, but it is a time-consuming and sometimes draining exercise. The second issue is the technical knowledge required to create and use photographs the way I have done. I have made suggestions as to how sociologists can take more meaning-rich photographs, but this does not mean that the task is simple or easily

achievable. Using photographs in social research effectively and evocatively for maximum impact requires time, effort and patience.

Summary and Concluding Statements

This thesis has primarily been about finding new ways to understand ethnicity-making amongst diasporic individuals who now constitute their own host society. In summary, my contributions to Sociology has been to reconfigure diasporic space into *transdiasporic space*, allowing for individualised diasporic journeys and an individual understanding of what it means to be diasporic, thereby allowing me to create a richly layered map of Singaporean Chineseness. I have *extended* ethnicity from a process to a *journey*, and in doing so have allowed for stories of individuals' life-paths to be told and directions of social trajectories in everyday life to be mapped out. Within this framework I have contributed concepts of ethnic lifestyles – sets of aesthetic markers used by an individual to make ethnicity, and ethnic tastes – preferences for her own or aspirations for or against other individuals' ethnic lifestyles. These two concepts especially allowed to me understand the mechanisms by which ethnicity was being made in weddings. The wedding as ritual proved to be more useful than simply a site to study conspicuous consumption – it was a place of scripts and spontaneity, of networks and negotiations. It was an intense burst of activity that encapsulated everyday life and distilled it into a concentrated form.

I brought together several disparate elements to create a more detailed and nuanced way of looking at ethnicity-making amongst diasporic individuals. These elements were social distances and trajectories, ethnic lifestyles and tastes, aesthetic markers, transdiasporic space and ethnicity as a journey. In doing so I revealed how ethnicity is made in flashpoints of visual encounters and aesthetic juxtapositions. Aesthetic dissonance allows for significant new insights into ethnic hybridity, exposing the compromise and coercions that may go on backstage, and serves as a warning towards overoptimism for the syncretic or hybridic consequences of globalisation. Aesthetic dissonance exposes the minute but significant differences in the ways individuals see themselves as Singaporean Chinese. It exposes the heterogeneity of contemporary Chinese diasporic individuals in ways rarely addressed by leveraging on aesthetics and social distances.

The degree of dissonance is intensified through commercialised processes which link economic wealth and ethnic lifestyles. Certain aesthetic markers become *associated* with conspicuous consumption, leading some socially aspirational individuals to distance themselves from other markers (and individuals) that fall outside of this association. Commercialised activities powerfully show the influence of economics in the social lives of individuals, and the way commercial transactions affect our decisions in other aspects of our

quotidian existence. At the same time, it also shows how economic outcomes are influenced by social activities, and how ethnicity-making can steer an individual's economic life-path.

This thesis has also shown how important the visual is to race, ethnicity and the making of race and ethnicity. The mechanisms of taste performances and aesthetic dissonance are significantly dependent on visual interaction between individuals, for if an individual was not *seen* espousing her ethnic lifestyle, there would be less chance of interaction. If an aesthetic marker is not *seen*, it is less likely to generate an experience of dissonance. Commercialised activities rely on visually-rich experiences to guarantee conspicuous consumption – the creation of image-worlds in pre-wedding photography, the use of advertisements in bridal magazines and the theatrical performances of wedding banquets all depend on visual communication to ensure a maximum amount of influence on their target audience.

The visual has also been a core feature and a crucial way of *conducting research*. It would have been extremely difficult to achieve an understanding of juxtaposed aesthetic markers that cause aesthetic dissonance if I had not employed a visually-focussed form of participant observation that allowed me to *watch*, learn and interpret. A key aspect to interpreting an individual's reaction to another individual's taste performance is an understanding of that individuals' *emotional reactions*. "Like" and "dislike" are difficult to verbalise and even harder to quantify. It is necessary to see an individual's reaction in their actions, their body language and both their pre-planned and real-time decisions. Visual methods map emotion in ways that textual methods alone would struggle to (Rose 2006). Evocative text like poetry acts as an emotional bridge that connects the image-world and the textual-world.

Final Reflections

Writing this thesis and reflecting upon my photography has become both an academic *and* personal journey. As I noted in chapter 4, part of my research involved drawing upon my own everyday life as a Chinese Singaporean in an auto/biographical method, expressed through my poetry. When I participated in and observed weddings, it was not just as a researcher but as a Chinese Singaporean. There were lives in Singapore I never knew were led, homes I never knew existed. My journey became an *emphatic* look into a variety of social, ethnic and economic journeys. It was and will be difficult for me to ever emotionally de-link myself from this field, because the places I have visited and dwelled in, however temporarily, will always be in some way my home.

The visuality of the mechanisms I have uncovered in ethnicity-making suggests to me that it is not just race and ethnicity that are visual. The social is visual as well. How we live, how we interact, how we *judge* others and ourselves are overtly focussed on our visual senses. Our physical and social mobilities are tempered by our ability to see. This means that the implicity

of the visual in our social processes needs to be made more explicitly, not just in studies of diaspora and ethnicity, but in all the other areas where sociologists try to understand how individuals live their lives. Throughout this thesis I have relied on the visual to gather, create, interpret and communicate my data. It is only fitting that I end it not just with words, but with words *and* images.

The photo-collection that follows this chapter is an evocative, summative conclusion to my thesis. It acts as an epilogue to bring together my findings of aesthetic dissonance in weddings, altered economic life-paths and mobilities of first/second generation Chinese Singaporeans, and social trajectories and everyday lives that intersect and clash for a brief, intense and highly emotional moment.

Epilogue: Look on my Hands and See it There: A Visual Biography of Chinese Migrant Workers in Singapore¹

“...biography can illustrate the emotional meaning of the conventional sociological wisdom that we are ‘socially’ constructed... the use of biography is not just to illustrate a social theory but to explain its meaning.” Evans 1993:10-11

This epilogue brings together a variety of issues I have raised in my thesis and my conclusion. In chapter 10, I argued that a Chinese Singaporean’s economic and social mobilities is affected by the kinds of aesthetic markers she chooses, and this is especially so amongst older Chinese Singaporeans who experience a dramatic change to the world around them. In this photo-collection I will present a visual biography of individuals whose diasporic journeys closely reflect experiences of aesthetic dissonance and altered economic life-paths and mobilities. I have chosen this group of individuals because they stand out so much in a wedding, their presence welcome and expected, but their comportment aesthetically dissonant (chapter 8) with the commercially dominant wedding aesthetic (chapter 9).

This group formed part of a generation of Singaporeans who (literally) built urban Singapore from nothing. Many came as labourers, most were extremely poor. My own grandparents were part of this generation who by the flows of globalised trade built themselves a home in Singapore yet found themselves foreign again as time went by. Their ethnic lifestyles have become out of sync with the conspicuous consumption characterised in contemporary wedding rituals. Their views of Singaporean Chineseness often considered awkward and obsolete by their grandchildren. They are honoured by their family, but they remain strange to so many others. As they become more aesthetically dissonant with a globalised society so do their social distances increase and their economic life-paths and mobilities change. The following aspects may be considered when viewing these photographs.

Hands

Hands are the tools of labour – fishermen, food hawkers, construction workers, even office workers use their hands to interact with their material environments. The lines and scars of their hands echo their social, diasporic and economic life-paths. Some photographs have been deliberately cropped to emphasise my subjects’ hands as well as the aesthetic markers that fill the immediate space around their hands – bangles, jewellery, clothing and so on.

¹ This photo-collection was first presented as part of a paper at the 2010 BSA Conference at Glasgow Caledonian University

Setting and Staging

I have used the wedding as a visually contrasting setting to accentuate the aesthetic dissonance experienced by these individuals in their everyday lives. All of these photographs were taken just before or during the tea ceremony – a ritual where cups of tea are served by the bridal couple as a sign of respect to their elders. The tea ceremony is a small moment in the wedding where family elders are brought to the forefront, before they quickly fade back into the background. I have photographed many of them sitting and waiting for these 30 seconds in the wedding, hands gingerly holding red packets meant as gifts for the bride and groom. I have also chosen to anonymise the bridal couple in most of these photographs as a way to reverse the commercially dominant aesthetic which places an emphasis on the bridal couple and their relationship with each other.

Title

The title of this collection is drawn from the poem “Wrestling Jacob” (Wesley 1740:115), a poem of journeys, conflicts, struggles, despair, spiritual seeking and eventual redemption. The poem speaks of an individual wrestling with God, and in doing so finds the spiritual through material and physical efforts (Watson 2002). Although primarily religious in theme, it is also a text that links the difficulties of a journey with the emotional and spiritual obstacles in life. The line that contributed this title powerfully poeticises what I want to express about human hands in my photography.

The second part of this title uses the term “Chinese migrant worker” ironically, as a reminder to Chinese Singaporeans that we all in one way or another have some kind of diasporic history, and continue our diasporic journeys in one way or another, even if we are not crossing nation-state boundaries. The title is also meant as a challenge to anti-immigration and neo-fascist sentiments often expressed on politicised internet blogs and websites about Singaporeans and their everyday interactions and relationships with immigrants, especially newly-arrived migrants from China.

Captions and Reading Sequence

The captions to these photographs form one continuous poem². This poem was written about my own social relationships, before the photographs were taken, but its ambiguity and exposition of relationships mapped well onto the photographs, which was why I chose it specifically as captions, rather than literally describing my subjects. I have separated the poem to act as evocative captions that texture the content of each photograph. Finally, the poem’s title was also appropriated for this collection to further intertwine text and image,

² Appendix 11 maps out the poem as it was originally written.

observation and participation, emotional and social. Unlike chapter 6, this collection is meant to be read linearly, each caption linked to the other (although it is also possible for them to be read separately and not in a linear sequence).

This photo-collection does not constitute a strict chronological biography, and neither is it meant to be one. Instead, it is meant to capture a moment in an individual's life path, and extrapolate an individual's diasporic journey from her aesthetic markers and comportment. This collection paves an exploratory route into the interconnections between the emotional and the social (Jackson 1993). By combining my autobiographical poetry, these biographical photographs, and my sociological findings in this thesis, I have worked to texture the sociological with the emotional. In doing this I have layered my informants' lives with my own emotional reactions, my own likes and dislikes. The result is an intertwining of our diasporic journeys into a continuous and still evolving visual dialogue.

Look on My Hands and See it There



**Your flame is comforting in this life's chill.
It envelopes me from howls and tolls, and cools**



the burning in my ears. Your permanence cancels



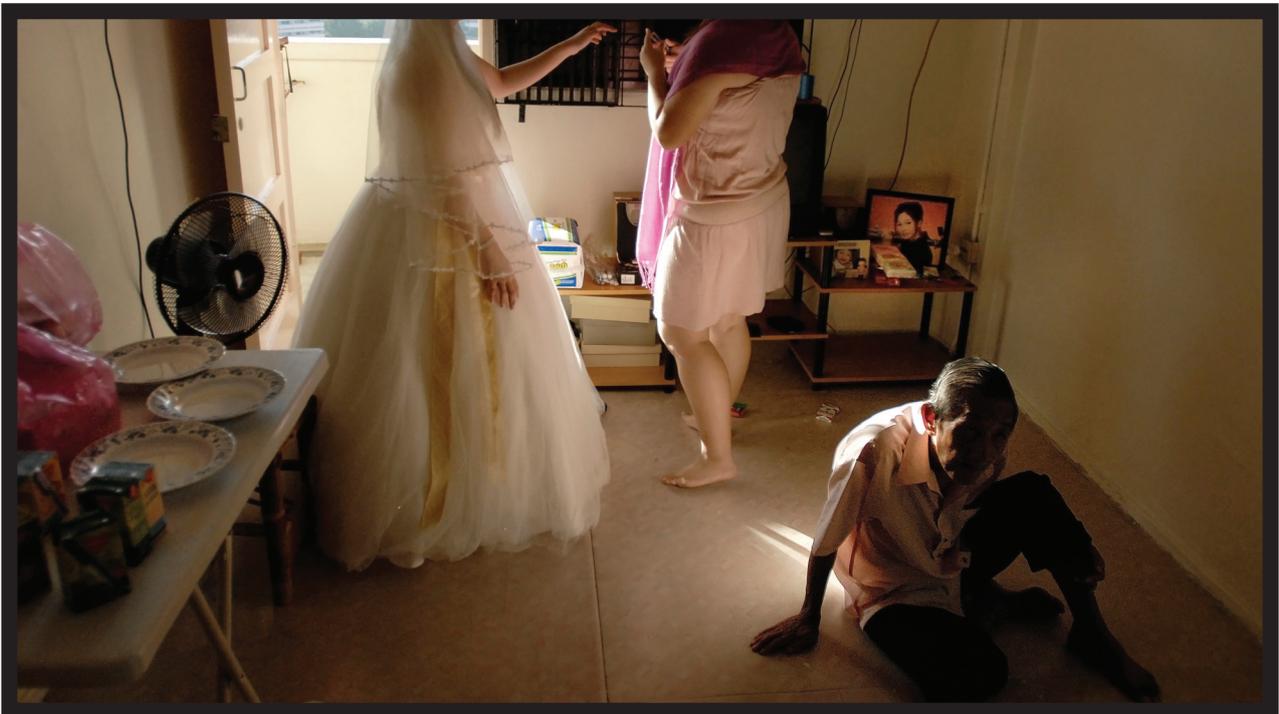
my transience, and makes me an eternal eternity.



But round that naked flame is cold quiet ash.



yielding yet defiant, pliant yet irresistible.



then wash it away, leaving nothing.



Your transience swallows, gapes, gorges.



Theirs is an incomplete beauty,



Pale grey shadow of a naked flame,



yet still offspring of flame.
But I am told that



neither reflections nor clones are ever enough.



I have your beauty, but they do not want it.



Quiet inaction creeps on all sides.



So mine are the fingers that rake that ash,



and grieve over soured offerings.

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THE STRAITS TIMES
Print Article

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Fined for hurting kiosk worker
By Elena Chong

A RELIEF cabby was fined \$3,000 on Wednesday for slapping and kicking a petrol station service attendant who had turned down his request to clean his vehicle windscreen. Ng Yew Kiong, 46, admitted to causing hurt to Chinese national Su Ya Kun, 20, at Caltex petrol kiosk at Clementi Avenue 2 on Oct 9 last year. The court heard that the victim was checking the petrol pumps at about 5.10am when Ng drove in to refuel his taxi.

After refuelling the vehicle, Ng approached the victim and shouted: 'Chinaman, do you want to help me clean my window?' The victim said he was checking the petrol pumps and could not do so. After making payment, Ng walked up to the victim, who was then squatting to check the pumps, pulled him up and gave him a slap on the cheek.

The victim ran into the Star Mart and called the police. Ng came in and kicked him on the stomach. Mr G Dinakaran said the victim's injuries were minor, and that his client had shown remorse by pleading guilty at the earliest opportunity. Ng could have been jailed for up to two years and/or fined up to \$5,000.

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THE STRAITS TIMES
Print Article

Aug 25, 2010

**'Learn English to fit in'
Shanghai-born S'porean is one of 4 'Outstanding New Immigrants'
By Elgin Toh**

LEARNING English tops the list of advice that Shanghai-born, long-time immigrant Fang Yuan has for new arrivals in Singapore from her country of origin. Speaking halting English when she joined her husband here in 1984 but determined to improve, she took lessons at the British Council for five years, spending six hours a week on the language.

The 62-year-old, an accomplished pianist in China, went on to teach music in English at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) and set up its youth school. 'There is no way you can integrate into mainstream Singapore society if you don't speak English,' she said, adding that new immigrants should adopt a fresh attitude when starting work here, and be open about learning from Singaporeans.

She is among four recipients of the inaugural Outstanding New Immigrant Award announced yesterday by the Hua Yuan Association, the largest group representing new Chinese immigrants here. The awards recognise post-1980 immigrants from China who have made significant contributions to society here. Organisers said they were looking not just for people eminent in their fields, but for those who also made an effort to integrate and give back to Singapore.

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Appendix 11: Look on My Hands and See it There

Your flame is comforting in this life's chill.
It envelopes me from howls and tolls, and cools
the burning in my ears. Your permanence cancels
my transience, and makes me an eternal eternity.

But round that naked flame is cold quiet ash.
They are a mountain of ash –
yielding yet defiant, pliant yet irresistible.

And their tears will harden their mountain,
then wash it away, leaving nothing.
Their transience is swallowing, gaping, gorging.

Theirs is an incomplete beauty, yet still a beauty.
Pale grey shadow of your naked flame,
yet still offspring of the flame. But I am told that
neither reflections nor clones are ever enough.
I have your beauty, but they do not want it.

Quiet inaction creeps on all sides.

So mine are the fingers that rake that ash,
and grieve over soured offerings.

Appendix 1A: The Overseas Chinese in Singapore: Reasons for Dispersal

Trade, as an early form of globalisation, proved to be a key motivating factor in the dispersal of migrants from China to South-East Asia (including Singapore). Chinese diasporic groups have been characterised as being both widely dispersed around the world as well as an example of an economically viable and successful form of diaspora (Wang 1991). Scholars have been largely interested in the trade and business aspects of Chinese migrants, including reasons for their economic success, as well as the use of connections and kinship in carrying out business. Trade has also been seen as a particularly important reason for dispersal amongst the Chinese in Southeast Asia prior to 1850 (Faxian and Legge 1886, Uchida 1960, Fitzgerald 1965, Yang 1985).

The eventual rise in status, popularity and uptake of the merchant class in 18th century China was not simply endogenous within the mindsets of the Chinese. Growing colonisation of South-East Asia by European powers contributed equally to the trend. The presence of Chinese traders and free trade seemed to be a sort of secret recipe to success. Globalisation in the form of early mercantile trading led to a demand for Chinese traders in European colonies in South-East Asia like Singapore and Indonesia. In the 19th century, Chinese traders were invited to Singapore (which before the arrival of the British was a local fishing village of little economic or strategic importance) by then governor Sir Stamford Raffles to develop the port, who later enthused that Singapore's prosperity was "the simple but almost magic result of that perfect freedom of Trade which is has been my good fortune to establish". (cited by Pan 1991:27) As Cohen notes of Raffles' musing

"Free trade *plus* the Chinese traders would have been a more accurate rendering of the magic formula." (Cohen 1997:86, emphasis added)

The Singaporean scholar Wang Gungwu (1991) has been noted for providing one of the most comprehensive reviews of the migration and movement patterns of the Chinese. Wang (1991) sets out the four historical patterns of Chinese migration over the last two centuries – The *Huashang* (Chinese trader), the *Huagong* (Chinese coolie, or labourer), the *Huaqiao* (Chinese sojourner) and the *Huayi* (Chinese descent) – the *Huayi* are more recent phenomenon that has been prevalent since the 1950s, and involves actors of Chinese descent, who have migrated from one foreign country to another country. Wang points to the example of some Chinese in Southeast Asia who moved to Western Europe in the 1950s because of the unfavourable political climate in their previous countries of residence, where "some Southeast Asian nations made those of Chinese descent feel unwanted". (Wang 1991:9)

What can be taken from Wang's study is to the importance of trade and an increasingly globalised world to Chinese migration. Economic motivation has played an important role in

the reasons for the dispersal of the Chinese, and continues to be a much examined topic when considering the Chinese diaspora, should not be seen as the *only* factor in movements of actors and formation of Chinese diasporic communities, but it has continued to be a prominent point of reference for scholars who study the Chinese diaspora. (Patterson 1975, Wang 1991, Kwong 1987, Waldinger and Tseng 1992).

There are many more studies and reasons for the global dispersal of the Chinese, including politics (Cohen 1997) as well as more labour-focused objectives like that of Chinese migrant railroad workers in North America. However, it is not in the scope of this thesis to consider why the Chinese do well economically, neither is it to exhaustively chart the reasons for their initial dispersal from Mainland China. Instead, it is to consider the contemporary formations of aspects of the Chinese diaspora that face new challenges and negotiations from a globalised society. Rather than move laterally through the history of Chinese dispersal, I will now focus on the Chinese in Southeast Asia and Singapore in particular to provide a contextual background to my analysis of the Chinese in contemporary Singapore.

Settling in Singapore: A Story of Race, Ethnicity, Diaspora and Globalisation

Diaspora, politics and race are key ingredients to explaining why they stayed *outside* of China. In this section I intend to argue that the formation of the nation-state of Singapore, comprised of a numerical majority (up to 80%) of Chinese individuals (Cohen 1997, Ang 2001, Poston et al 1994), is at heart a story of race, ethnicity, globalisation and diaspora. This is important, because it means that *Singaporean* Chineseness was forged in the politics of race, ethnicity and nationalism. This has ramifications to the way Chineseness is defined in contemporary Singapore by state and individual alike.

Chinese individuals in Singapore (and Southeast Asia in general) had migrated in search of economic opportunity, mostly as traders but also as labourers (Cohen 1997). One important point to note, as emphasised by Wang (1991), was that these traders did not have a political loyalty to the colonial powers that controlled the region at the time – their migration was temporary, leveraging on an increasingly globalised world where trade in goods afforded them transnational movement and economic gain. Wang termed this practice of temporary migration as “sojourning”. Some scholars like Pan (1991:12-13), speculate that the reasons for sojourning was embodied in migrants’ concept of *hsiang* (home), an emotional attachment to a place (not necessarily China as a whole, but could be a village, town, countryside or landscape) that sometimes had implications of filial duty to one’s parents or elders. It is in the concept of *hsiang* do we see the way diasporic individuals conceive an imagined “homeland”.

Sojourning eventually gave way to settlement, but this was not strictly voluntary on the part of migrants. After the 1911 revolution in China, the difficulty with maintaining a link with *hsiang*

and working abroad was compounded by three issues. One, the growing nationalisms of the former colonies who were also in the processes of creating their own nation-states. Two, second and third generations of immigrants had begun to settle within the foreign countries and become culturally localised - a good example being the Peranakans¹, where the Chinese intermarried with the local indigenous population and developed a syncretised subculture unto themselves. Three, the 1949 post-revolution government and diaspora groups had widening ideological viewpoints, and physically moving in and out of China proved to be difficult. A good example of the growing nationalisms that made sojourning unviable was the decolonisation of Malaya. As the colonial powers faded, it was left to the individuals that remained in the former colonies to constitute a nation out of the colonies of Malaysia and Singapore. The indigenous population, that being individuals who occupied the land before the arrival of the British and Chinese, defined themselves ethnically as Malay. The Malays were predominately Muslim in religion, spoke their own language and practiced their own customs which were distinct enough from Chinese and Indian (the two larger ethnic minorities) religions, languages and customs for politicians to create differences for the purposes of nationalism.

Southeast-Asian Chineseness in this context was thus forged in opposition to Malayness and Malaysian nationalisms. Lian (1995:392-396) shows how minority groups like the Chinese were marginalised and scapegoated as alien minorities by an ethnic Malay majority based on differing religions and outward visual appearances, and also because many of them held positions in society that Malay nationalist elites craved. They were also accused of having little commitment to forming a postcolonial nation, which as Lian points out, was statistically unfair in terms of population movements and the local Chinese birth rates. Thus Chinese migrants were placed in a no-win situation, as sojourning brought accusations of lack of commitment and staying meant being a threat.

The nation-state of Singapore underwent a similar process in its formation. Initial attempts to create a Malayan Federation meant that Singapore was a Chinese-dominated state in a federation of Malay-dominated states. Malaysian (largely Malay) and Singaporean (largely Chinese) politicians had different criteria for citizenship in the negotiation of a post-colonial nation. The Malays focused on a strict criteria of a citizen being a *bumiputra* (Prince of the Soil), and had to speak the Malay language, practice the Islamic religion and follow Malay customs. The Chinese on the other hand demanded equality, and a freedom to practice their own religion and customs. The Chinese-dominated state of Singapore eventually left to form its own nation-state, catalysed by the Sino-Malay riots in 1964. Since its independence in 1965, the population of Singapore has remained largely ethnically Chinese. Poston et al (1994), in a global study of Chinese population numbers, show that Singapore has the highest concentration of Chinese people per population in the world, outside of China, Hong Kong

¹ See Ang (2001) for an explanation of the Peranakan culture

and Macau. (Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have a greater absolute number, but still comprise a minority within the country) Chinese individuals in Singapore numbered 7767.1 per 10,000 persons per population, giving an almost 80% majority.

In short, Singaporean Chineseness was produced against the backdrop of contested racial and ethnic identities. Even today, the Singapore state remains sensitive to its geopolitical position as a nation of majority ethnic Chinese surrounded by nation-states of majority ethnic Malays and Indonesians. This sensitivity has been manifested with Singapore, despite never having gone to war with its neighbours, being placed 24th in the world for GDP defence expenditure, ahead of Egypt and Pakistan², and almost as much as its two closest neighbours (Malaysia and Indonesia) combined. However, it should be noted that the state's concerns are not without reason. For example, in an article in the Wall Street Journal, then president of Indonesia B.J. Habibie dismissed Singapore as an inconsequential "little red dot" in contrast to the large "green" area of Indonesia's 211 million people, using the archetypal colours of red (Chinese) and green (Islamic) to emphasise a suggested ethnic divide. The result of these international relationships of occasional ethnic tension means that the Singapore state's domestic policy is strongly centred on creating and maintaining a coherent political and ethnic entity around a majority ethnic Chinese population and government.

² http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/policy/securityspending/articles/fy09_dod_request_global/

Appendix 4A: Visual Field Notes



Name of Informants: Jim (SG) / Amelia (SG)	Wedding Date: AD Dec 04
Locations: HDB3-Potong Pasir – HDB4 Cantonment Road – HDB3 Bukit Merah – Grand Copthorne Hotel	
Current Location: Jim's family home, master bedroom	
Action: Jim removes Amelia's veil in a ritual cementing his position as Amelia's husband, instructed by his parents to do so.	
<p>Remarks: Jim's fingers are hesitant, he's unfamiliar with what to do because he wasn't prepared and is acting on instructions of his elders. The couple have been very compliant for the duration of the wedding, they do not protest at doing any ritual given to them.</p> <p>I feel uncomfortable with this photograph because I actively intervened in this scene to capture the backlight against Amelia's face and gown. I instructed one of the bridesmaids to turn off the light in the room to create a shadow.</p>	



Name of Informants: Tyler (MY) / Ellyse (SG)	Wedding Date: PW May 06 (US) / AD Jul 07
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Locations: HDB4-Clementi – Bungalow-Malaysia – Restaurant-Malaysia – Westin Singapore

Current Location: Ellyse’s family home, HDB block in Clementi

Action: Door games and tea ceremony in Ellyse’s home are over, the couple are preparing to cross the border into Malaysia to Tyler’s home

<p>Remarks: It has been a long morning, we’ve started at 6am and we aren’t going to stop for a couple more hours. Ellyse and Tyler have already been photographed by me in the US so they know why I’m hanging back and photographing surreptitiously.</p> <p>She cocks her head to the side as if to signal her tiredness. It’s a familiar photograph, the mundane-ness of a HDB flat and the opulence of a wedding gown.</p> <p>I wanted to contrast the liminal, transient spaces of everyday movement with the “specialness” of the wedding gown. That has been a running theme in many weddings I photograph.</p>
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Name of Informants: Kian Wee (SG) / Sonia (MR)	Wedding Date: AD Dec 05
Locations: Carlton Hotel – HDB5 Boon Lay – St Marys of the Angels, Bukit Batok – Chijmes (Dinner)	
Current Location: Kian Wee’s home in Boon Lay, west of Singapore	
Action: Kian Wee and Sonia offer incense to Kian Wee’s ancestors at the family altar.	
<p>Remarks: This is a repeated contrast of religions and faiths in Singaporean Chinese weddings – Kian Wee and Sonia married in a Catholic church after this ceremony. Part of this was out of deference to Kian Wee’s parents, as was evidenced in other rituals in their home when they had to consume an unexpected meal of <i>mee sua</i>.</p> <p>The inclusion of Mickey Mouse was unexpected. It was actually a phone (power adaptor behind it) but forced perspective makes it look like they are praying to Mickey. I like to think of this photo as a summary of the conflicting faiths and journeys of the different participants at the wedding.</p>	

Appendix 4B: Grid of Weddings Photographed

Bride Name	Age	Groom Name	Age	Wedding Types	Locations	Bride Home	Groom Home	Bride Quils	Groom Quils	Bride Occ	Groom Occ	Wedding	Wedding Sequence	Notables	Legend
Cheri	33	Adrian	34	PW+AD	SG	Terrace-Bukit Timah	Bungalow-Mt Sinal	Graduate	Graduate	Auditor	Civil Servant	Jul-10	Tea-Church-Dinner		Civil Servant
Shu Li (UK)	28	Andy (UK)	28	AD	UK	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	Graduate	Graduate	Accountant	IT	Mar-10	ROM-Dinner-Tea		Wedding Type
Callin	29	Jasper	29	PW	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Lawyer	Banker	Aug-10	Pre-Wedding		AD
Coraline (ESP)	29	Dean (UK)	31	AD	UK	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	Graduate	Graduate	Postgraduate	IT	Mar-09	ROM-Recption		PW
Louis	30	Aida	30	PW+AD	UK+SG	Conds-Jurong	HDB5-Pasir Ris	Graduate	Graduate	Architect	Architect	Jan-08	Tea-Church		ROM
Ellia (INDO)	29	Ross	31	PW+AD	UK+SG	HDB5-Bukit Panjang	Terrace-East Coast	Graduate	Graduate	Programmer	Systems Analyst	Dec-07	Tea-Church		Pre-wedding done in UK
Sofia	28	Reese	30	AD	SG	Bungalow-Clementi	Terrace-Thomson	Graduate	Graduate	Engineer	Engineer	Dec-07	Tea-DinnerROM		Also Pre-Wedding in UK
Colleen	30	William	30	AD	SG	HDB4-Hougang	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Manager	Manager	Dec-07	Church-Recp-Tea		Housing Type
Gail	25	Liam	25	PW	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	Polytechnic	Polytechnic	NA	NA	Nov-07	Pre-Wedding		HDB3
Kyra	29	Han Ming	29	AD	SG	Conds-Jurong	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Banking	Photographer	Jul-07	Church-Tea-Dinner		HDB4
Ieslyn	31	Boon	34	AD	SG	HDB5-Bukit Batok	HDB-Pasir Ris	Graduate	Graduate	Auditor	IT	Jul-07	Tea-Dinner		HDB5
Carra	28	Joshua	30	AD	SG	HDB4-Hougang	HDB5-Esplan	Graduate	Graduate	NA	NA	Jul-07	Tea-Dinner		HDBEM
Perlethe (ESP)	32	Rory (HK)	33	AD	ESP	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Banker	Banker	Jun-07	Church-Dinner		EC
Si Ping (AU)	25	Tze Chen	28	AD	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Banker	Banker	Jun-07	Church-Dinner		Terraced House
Millie	28	Caron Leng	30	AD	SG	HDB3-Hougang	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Teacher	Civil Servant	Dec-06	Tea-Dinner		Semi-Detached House
Andrea	23	Cameron	24	AD	SG	HDB3-Chinatown	HDB4-Ang Mo Kio	Polytechnic	Polytechnic	Admin Asst	Technical Officer	Dec-06	Tea-Dinner		Bungalow
Iechia	25	In Loong	26	AD	SG	HDB4-Ang Mo Kio	HDB-Compassvale	Graduate	Graduate	NA	Engineer	Dec-06	Tea-Dinner		Condo
Choo Ling	31	Albert	34	AD	SG	Terrace-Thomson	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Financial Advisor	Engineer	Nov-06	Tea-Church-Tea-Dinner		Wedding Events
Marko (JP)	26	Sasuke (JP)	28	PW+AD	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	NA	NA	Home Maker	Asst Professor	Aug-06	Pre-Wedding		Tea
Elsa	29	Anthony	32	AD	SG	Terrace-Paya Lebar	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Teacher	Business Admhn	Jul-06	Church-Tea-Dinner		Tea Ceremony
Elyse	28	Tyer (MY)	29	PW+AD+AD	US+SG+MY	HDB4-Clementi	Bungalow-JB	Graduate	Graduate	Accountant	Accountant	Jul-06	Tea-Dinner		Wedding Reception
Charlene	25	Roman	25	AD	SG	HDB4-Bedok	HDB-Bedok	Polytechnic	Polytechnic	NA	Video Producer	Jul-06	Tea-Church-Dinner		Civil Ceremony
Corrine	27	Eik Leng	27	AD	SG	HDB4-East Coast	HDB5-Choa Chu Kang	Graduate	Graduate	NA	NA	Jul-06	Tea-Church-Dinner		Ceremony + Banquet
Dorra	28	Guy (FR)	30	AD	FR+SG	Conds-Sarangboon	Terrace-France	Polytechnic	Graduate	Account Exec	Business Dev	Jun-06	Church-Dinner		Nationality/ Country Codes
Cadence	26	Alex	27	AD	SG	HDB4-Pasir Ris	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Legal Engineer	Civil Servant	May-06	Tea-Church-Dinner		ESP
Marta	28	Terry (IRE)	28	PW	UK	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Sales Engineer	NA	May-06	Pre-Wedding		Spain
Ruth	26	Han Lee	28	AD	SG	HDB3-Holland Village	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Legal Counsel	NA	May-06	Pre-Wedding		France
Cedyn	30	Joo Hong	32	AD	SG	Conds-Clementi	HDB5-Bukit Panjang	Graduate	Graduate	Civil Servant	Lecturer	Mar-06	Tea-Church-Dinner		FR
Vanessa (KR)	27	Jayden	28	AD	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Business Dev	Business Dev	Mar-06	Tea-Dinner		Hong Kong
Jossey	27	Lewis (NZ)	27	AD	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Doctor	Advertising	Jan-06	ROM-Dinner		Republic of Ireland
Wiven	29	Yung	31	AD	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	NA	Doctor	Jan-06	Church-Dinner		Japan
Sonia (MR)	29	Kim Wee	32	AD	SG	HDB5-Toh Guan	HDB-Boon Lay	Graduate	Graduate	Architect	Architect	Dec-05	Tea-Church-Dinner		Malaysia
Katie	24	Lin Hui	24	AD	SG	HDB5-Mo Tuck	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Teacher	Engineer	Dec-05	Tea-Church-Dinner-Lunch		Russia
Cynthia	26	Gary	26	AD	SG	Terrace-Bedok	HDB5-NA	Graduate	Graduate	Self-Employed	Army Officer	Dec-05	Tea-Dinner		United Kingdom
Keren	28	Adam	28	AD	SG	Not Visited	Sembd-East Coast	Graduate	Graduate	Banking	IT Businessman	Sep-05	Tea-DinnerROM		United States
Veron	27	Zach	29	AD	SG	HDB5-Yshun	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Banking	NA	Sep-05	Tea-Dinner		Notes
Winnie	24	Yan Ming	25	AD	SG	HDB3-Teok Blangah	HDB6-Commonwealth Dr	Polytechnic	Polytechnic	Admin Asst	NA	Sep-05	Tea-Dinner		Parents of Groom ex-Indonesian
Jim Mei	26	Conner	30	AD	SG	HDB4-Tong Bahru	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Programmer	Car Salesman	Jul-05	Pre-Wedding		Matrimonial home substituted for Groom's Home
Alicia	30	Daiwin	30	AD	SG	HDB3-Tong Bahru	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Freelance Writer	Asst Professor	Jul-05	Tea-Church-DinnerROM		Agess correct at point of wedding
Xiu Ping	29	Inna (RUS)	31	AD	SG	Terrace-Yio Chu Kang	Russia	Graduate	Graduate	Architect	Architect	Jul-05	Church-Dinner		See Chapter 6 for Map of Singapore
Cing Qing (MY)	31	Kerian	35	AD	SG+MY	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Accountant	Accountant	Jun-05	Dinner-Dinner		Dinner held on 3rd July 2005
Dawn	31	Soon Wang	33	AD	SG	HDB5-NA	HDB-Woodlands	Graduate	Graduate	NA	NA	Jun-05	Church-Lunch		Second dinner in Batu Pahat 02/07/05
Hian Ping	30	Dominic (UK)	32	AD	UK	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Banking	Banking	Apr-05	Tea-Church-Dinner		Wedding in London, Dinner in Chinatown
Wen Mei	27	Carter	28	AD	SG	Sembd-Holland Road	HDB3-Bukit Merah	Graduate	Graduate	Banking	Ratings	Apr-05	Tea-Church-Dinner		
Simona	29	Paul	31	AD	SG	Bungalow	HDB	Graduate	Graduate	Lecturer	Lawyer	Apr-05	Tea-Church-Dinner		
Ming Ming	26	Fraser	28	AD	SG	HDB4-Tong Bahru	Terrace-East Coast	Graduate	Graduate	Secretary	Legal Counsel	Mar-05	Tea-Dinner		
Linda	41	George (US)	50	AD	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Teacher	Teacher	Dec-04	Dinner		
Jim	26	Amelia	26	AD	SG	HDB3-Potong Pasir	HDB3-Bukit Merah	Polytechnic	Polytechnic	Web Designer	Web Designer	Dec-04	Tea-Dinner		
Yin Lin	27	Owen	28	AD	SG	HDB-Hougang	HDB-Jurong	Graduate	Graduate	Food Tech	Army Officer	Dec-04	Tea-Dinner		
Geri	33	Ryan (UK)	38	AD	SG	Bungalow-East Coast	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Writer	Designer	Dec-04	Church-Tea		
Carren	30	Desmond (MY)	30	AD	SG	Terrace-Bridgell	Not Visited (Malaysia)	Graduate	Graduate	IT	IT	Dec-04	Tea-Church-Dinner		
Tze Ling	25	Kenzie	27	AD	SG	Terrace-Yio Chu Kang	HDB3-Yshun	NA	NA	NA	Police Officer	Dec-04	Tea-Dinner		YCK is Grandma's place
Melcom	28	Jane	26	AD	SG	HDBEM-Tampines	Terrace-East Coast	Graduate	Graduate	IT	Teacher	Dec-04	Tea-ROM-Church-Dinner		Spilt over 2 days
Jess	27	Mason	28	AD	SG	Not Visited	HDB5-Boon Lay	NA	NA	Exes Secretary	NA	Sep-04	Tea-Dinner		
Elysha	27	Ethan	28	AD	SG	HDB5-Boon Lay	HDB3-Bukit Merah	Polytechnic	Polytechnic	Business Mgr	Business Mgr	Sep-04	Tea-Church-Dinner		
Liling	25	James	30	AD	SG	HDB4-Woodlands	HDB3-Teok Blangah	Graduate	Graduate	NA	IT	Sep-04	Church-Tea-Dinner		
Joann	27	Austin	27	AD	SG	HDB4-Yshun	HDB4-Lorong An Soo	Graduate	Graduate	Lecturer	Lecturer	Sep-04	Tea-Dinner		
Iuliet	24	Stanley	26	AD	SG	Terrace-Sekaiar	Bungalow-Upper Bt Timah	Graduate	Graduate	Business Admhn	Engineer	Sep-04	Tea-Church-Dinner		Stopped at Greenleaf to serve tea to grandma
Lella	28	Ben	28	EP	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	NA	NA	Aug-04	Engagement Reception		Interviewed Bride separately
Elifor	26	Luke	28	AD	SG	HDBEM-Toh Tuck	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Lecturer	Lawyer	Jun-04	Tea-Dinner		Wedding in Malaysia
Ang Joo (MY)	27	Dylan (MY)	29	AD	MY	Bungalow-JB	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Teacher	NA	Jun-04	Tea-Dinner		
Joy	27	Choon Seng	27	AD	SG	HDBEM-Bukit Batok	HDB4-Bukit Batok	Graduate	Graduate	NA	Naval Officer	May-04	Tea-Dinner		
Jane	26	Aston	26	AD	SG	HDB-Clementi	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Civil Servant	Attorney	May-04	Church-Dinner		
Grace	33	Jacob	36	AD	SG	Not Visited	Conds-Orchard Road	Graduate	Graduate	Music Teacher	Banker	Dec-03	Tea-Church-Dinner		Hotel substituted as bride's home
Suzan	25	Jonathan	29	AD	SG	HDB3	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Media	Lawyer	Nov-03	Tea-ROM-Dinner		
Beilga	28	Warren	28	AD	SG	Not Visited	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Lawyer	Accountant	Jul-03	Dinner		
Estee	26	Roger	26	AD	SG	EC-Hougang	Sembd-Yio Chu Kang	Graduate	Graduate	Accountant	NA	May-03	Tea-Church-Dinner		
Page	24	Finn	26	AD	SG	HDB5-Simei	HDB-NA	Graduate	Graduate	NA	NA	Feb-03	Tea-Dinner		
Fiona	28	Patrick	29	AD	SG	HDB5-Thomson	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Lecturer	NA	Jan-03	Tea-Church-Dinner		

Appendix 4C: Supplementary Interviews

Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3	Interviewee 4	Interview Loc	Bride Home	Groom Home	Bride Quals	Groom Quals	Bride Occ	Groom Occ	Interview Period
Tatiana (Bride)	Sato (Groom-JP)	NA	NA	Informant Home	HDB-East Coast	Japan	Graduate	Graduate	Postgraduate	PhD Student	July 2010
Charlotte (Bride)	Harry (Groom)	NA	NA	Researcher Home	SemiD-Upper Thomson	Condo-Orchard Road	Graduate	Graduate	Mgmt Consultant	Lawyer	June 2009
Carrie (Bride)	Chris (Groom)	NA	NA	Informant Home	Terrace-Upper Thomson	SemiD-Upper Thomson	Graduate	Graduate	Lawyer	Musician	June 2009
Susan (Bride)	Han (Groom)	Thomas (Groom)	Cindy (Bride)	Informant Home	Condo-Sin Ming	Condo-Sin Ming	Graduate	Graduate	NA	NA	June 2009
Poon (Mother of Groom)	Cindy (Groom's Sister)	NA	NA	Informant Home	HDB-Tampines	HDB-Bukit Panjang	Graduate	Graduate	Business Mgr	Business Mgr	May 2006
Ruth (Bride)	Hian Lee (Groom)	Ivan (Father of Bride)	Nellie (Mother of Bride)	Informant Home	Condo-Clementi	HDB3-Holland Village	Graduate	Graduate	Civil Servant	Lecturer	May 2006
Dora (Bride)	NA	NA	NA	Café	HDBEM-Toh Tuck Road	HDB-Bukit Panjang	Graduate	Graduate	Lecturer	Lawyer	Jan 2006
Millie (Bride)	Boon Leng (Groom)	Rebecca (Sister of Bride)	NA	Researcher Home	HDB5-Hougang	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Teacher	Civil Servant	Dec 2008
Phoebe (Bride)	NA	NA	NA	Instant Messenger	Terrace-Braddell	Not Visited	Graduate	Graduate	Civil Servant	Civil Servant	Aug 2010

Appendix 4D: Internet Forum Postings Grid

Thread Title	Topic	URL	Posts Reviewed
"Guo Da Li (过大礼) ?? "si dian jin (四点心)"	Betrothal Ceremonies	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/3/2652.html?1276390208	120
"Xi Bing" from Traditional Teochew Pastry Shop	Bridal Jewellery	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/3/3575.html?1274256243	412
Guo Da Li and Jia Zhuang	Wedding cake gifts	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/3/1170391.html?1278387482	8
MOTHER-IN-LAW : LOVE THEM OR HATE THEM	Items for Betrothal Ceremonies	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/3/765723.html?12256812719	21
Actual Day -- wat should happen?????	Discussion about in-law, some wedding preparation	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/3/352578.html?1257780018	82
Actual Day Program. Need some guidance	Wedding Day Sequences	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/377529.html?1264579499	34
Any Alternatives to yum seng?	Wedding Day Sequences	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/433666.html?1278379898	229
Anyone has done this before?	Wedding Day Sequences	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/515677.html?1280216420	67
Anyone meeting fiance at church and no bride pick up?	Toasting ceremony at Wedding Banquet	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/1055955.html?1268111804	6
Don't want gatecrash	Teochew wedding rituals	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/670168.html?1260926512	46
Guo Da Li List of things	What rituals compose a wedding	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/723390.html?1265467346	9
HOKKIE BRIDES... AnyONE?~~~~~	What rituals compose a wedding (No Door Games)	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/610866.html?1265467346	18
Hainanese Brides, anyone???	Brides who do not want door games	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/592069.html?1280501381	102
Is this reasonable?	Artefacts for betrothal ceremonies	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/510742.html?1275376419	138
Pin Jin...Pls help!	Hokkien wedding rituals	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/1947251.html?1246517691	86
Who got the Marriage Budget Spreadsheet?	Hainanese Wedding rituals	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/360669.html?1276845585	120
	Wedding inventories	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/601867.html?1278997744	36
	Parental Conflict	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/412009.html?1278997744	63
	Bride Price	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/410547.html?1270802135	76
	Wedding Budget Spreadsheet Dessimination	http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/390554.html?1271647583	406
		Total Posts Reviewed	2079

Appendix 4E

Internet Forum Postings – Recorded Posts about Wedding Day Rituals

My HTB's younger bro married off the same way - wife and husband only meet in church. and for the rest of the year this has been the topic of gossip for his family and well as my family. I think for the older folks they sort of deem this as the girl throwing herself to the guy side..and to make matters worse, the girl did not even bother to have tea ceremony for her own parents.

Even this incident did not happen, I will still insist to have the guy pick the girl from home - i don't know if this is a religious practise or not I always thought its a chinese custom and should be followed if we are chinese. Just like christians also celebrate chinese new year right?

HABE (habe) Wednesday, December 17, 2008 - 6:47 pm
<http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/610866.html?1265467346>
Keywords: Parents, Tradition, Conflict, Explicit Chinese, Christianity

As a Chinese, I am still holding my tea ceremony - but only AFTER the church ceremony. My reason is that because God is the #1 priority in my life, the most important ceremony to me is the one that is conducted in church. However as a Chinese, my traditions (not the religious customs) are still important to me so I also want to have tea ceremony and "chu jia" after the church wedding.

jadeite (jadeite) Tuesday, April 28, 2009 - 7:07 am
<http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/610866.html?1265467346>
Keywords: Tradition,, Explicit Chinese, Christianity

Totally agree *2 hands up*. U went the other time i went there to buy "some" things & it already cost me \$150. It was so so so expensive! And i can even name out how many things i buy..

1. Potty
2. 2 face towel
3. 3 Lamps
4. Baby's bathing tube
5. 2 pairs of slippers
6. 1 Red Big plate
7. 1 Cup

Lovie Dovie (lovie_dovie) Posted on Wednesday, June 17, 2009 - 9:36 am:
<http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/947251.html?1246517691>
Keywords: Wedding Artefact Inventory

Yes, I have roast pig on AD. What I understand from the older folks is:

- 1) the person to slice the roast pig has to be a 有福 person (dunno who they define that)
- 2) slice off the tail and the head, return to the groom. the bride keeps the body and distributes to the relatives on AD

3) prepare 3 items for the groom to bring back; it symbolises, the in laws are presenting gifts to the son-in-law.

place the 3 items, wrapped in red paper, in the centre of the roast pig, with the head and the tail at each end (like the complete shape of the roast pig)

- ang bao (its like giving 金 in cantonese)

- a pair of pants (衣服; the 服 rhymes with 福 in cantonese, meaning he will have fortune)

- a belt (皮帶; the 帶 rhymes with 戴 in cantonese, meaning his pockets will always be filled)

iViED (ivied) Posted on Monday, October 26, 2009 - 4:59 pm:

<http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/360669.html?1276845585>

Keywords: Roast Pig, Ritual Procedures,

Just to add on, changing into a tea dress is a symbolism of hui niang jia. Traditionally, we should go back to our parents' home 3 days after getting married. But this is sort of abolished in our new generation.

The new brides now just change into a tea dress and head back home after serving tea to the in laws. So its like you get married in wedding dress and head home in another outfit.

So the tea dress can be just a dress or KUA which ever suits u.

iViED (ivied) Posted on Thursday, March 05, 2009 - 8:54 pm:

<http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/1018268.html?1237825243>

Keywords: Tradition, Adaptation

According to my Mum (she is hokkien)..

Hokkien brides usually will received a Roasted pig leg..the guy's parents might buy 4 gold bangles for the DIL..as for Pin jin..she say actually they dun ask one..so it all depend on how much the guys side wanna give..instead they will jus ask for tables..

Cantonese Bride will be the one receiving 1 suckling pig..

Teochew Bride will received 4 dan jin from the guy's parents..

As for cakes..i guess ur parents can request so as to distribute to ur relative to let them know abt ur wedding news..

Thats all the info i have..hope these might help..

Nicole ~ (xiaozhunic) Posted on Monday, October 16, 2006 - 4:53 pm:

<http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/36737/410547.html?1270802135>

Keywords: Dialect Variations, Wedding Inventory

Appendix 5A

Little India

Terence Heng, 2004

Forget me when I'm done with your palaces, the same way the architects were slaughtered to preserve the beauty of my country's landmark. Your noses shrivel and turn when you see me in my sarong, or when I hold the hand of my same-sex friend. You say it's hard to see me at night unless I smile.

So I smile, and remain fatalistic about crossing the street, just as I do at home. I will build your castles, and occasionally die for them. I will cook my food where you throw yours, and hold the hand of my same-sex friend. You know, where I come from, that's what friends do.



Appendix 5B

Postcards from Chinatown

Terence Heng, 2004

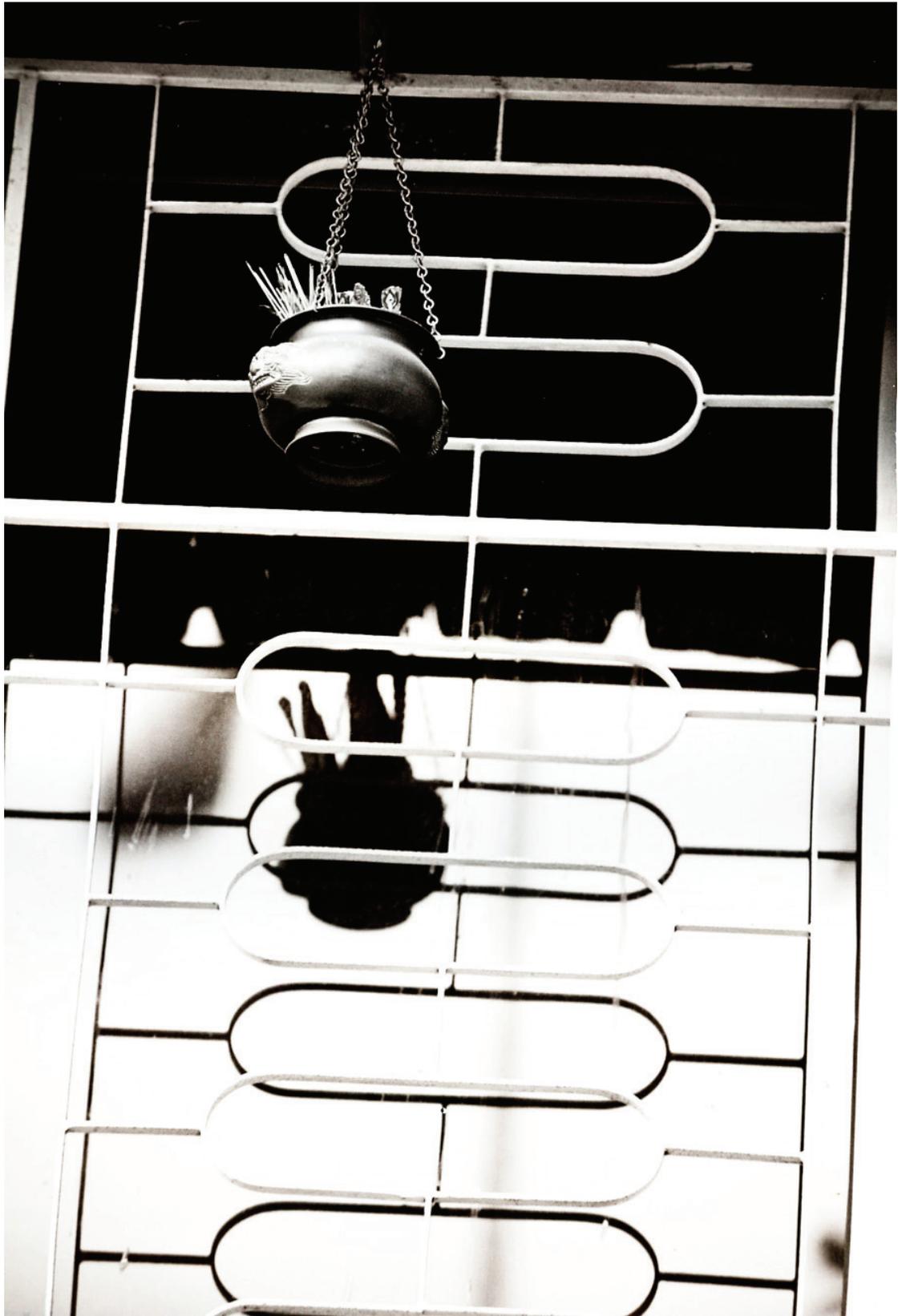
Racks of clothes along racks of clocks, as
if ticking away the fashion of the eras.
Fortune telling machine, I never
stepped on one before. Durian sign sale,
bicycle underneath a no-bicycle sign.
Rusty tishaw parked outside renovated
lifts. And an old dental surgery somewhere
next to an older barber in the HDB.
Urn, three joss sticks burnt out sometime ago.

That was the background where I walked,
background of the closed down emporium,
background of the foreign worker outside
an unopened shophouse. Background wet market,
background unanswered responses to the cajoling
from the hawkers in the background hawker centre.
Background, backstage.

Our performance dictates a different set of scripts.
Souvenir shops selling chinese hats and fake
pigtailed to the end.
Umbrellas for holding water.

Postcards of nothing we really do.

I'll sell this as distinctly local. Our whole stage of
rojak culture and the embracement of strolling
down the street back into the tourist bus. Shiny shiny
trishaws and fluorescent T-shirts peddle you around
the incorporated country. This is Singapore,
ladies and gentlemen, although you don't see
the locals anywhere.



Appendix 6A

Glossary of Housing Types

HDB Flat	<p>An HDB flat is a mostly single-storey apartment situated in a high-density block. Initially built as a cheap and efficient way to house Singapore's growing population in the 1960s, HDB flats have become the most common form of housing in Singapore.</p> <p>HDB flats are built and subsidised by the state's housing agency, the Housing Development Board (HDB). They tend to be the de-facto first form of housing for young couples. Singaporeans and Permanent Singaporean residents are allowed to apply to the HDB for a flat, but must constitute a "family unit" (eg parent-child, spouses, grandparent-child) to be eligible unless the individual is above the age of 35.</p> <p>HDB flats are classified according to their number of rooms, including living/dining areas, but not the kitchen or bathrooms. Hence, a 2-bedroom HDB flat would be a 3-Room Flat, and a 4-bedroom flat would be a 5-room flat. A small number of flats built by the HDB are 4 bedroom masionettes and are usually the most expensive. The following list compiles the most common varieties of flats, from least to most expensive.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2-room HDB flats (usually reserved for lower-income families)• 3-room (Newly married couples usually aim to buy 3/4/5 room flats as their first property)• 4-room• 5-room• Executive Apartment• Executive Masionette <p>For more information about Singapore state policy to housing see Sung (2006) and http://www.hdb.gov.sg</p>
Private Housing	<p>Private housing encompasses any form of housing that is not built or subsidised by the Singapore state. Approximately 16% of Singaporeans live in private housing, of which the following variants are the most common</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Condominiums (Private Apartments)• Terraced Houses• Semi-Detached Houses• Detached Houses• Good Class Bungalows <p>Prices of private housing vary from location to location but are almost always more expensive than HDB flats, owing to state subsidies and the resale market. Private housing is often seen by Singaporeans as a marker of economic attainment, being part of the 5C's (Cash, Car, Condominium, Credit Card, Country Club Membership) of popular discourse (Chua 2003).</p> <p>For more information about private housing and housing in general in Singapore see Phang (2007:15-44)</p>

Appendix 7A: How Singaporean Chineseness became Linked to Economic Wealth

Singaporean Chineseness and economic wealth have been intertwined ever since migrants from China chose to settle in Singapore and build a nation-state after World War II. How speaking Mandarin or dialects and consuming aesthetic markers attributed to “China” became associated with being poor stems from Singapore’s deep involvement with global trade and globalisation, as well as the Singaporean state’s policy to remove the use of Chinese dialects amongst Chinese Singaporeans. The terms “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” are cemented in popular discourse to describe and account for the social, economic and cultural divisions between individuals who have perceived contrasting lifestyles. As such, their consumption patterns have become aesthetic markers of their ethnic lifestyles. Fashion, brands, postal codes, where one drinks one’s coffee are all associated with veering towards either a “cosmopolitan” or “heartlander” lifestyle.

Singapore’s connection with English-speaking nation-states is at the very core of its origination, having been founded as a British colony¹ (Cohen 1997). As Singapore moved from colony to nation-state after the Second World War, its connections with the West, especially Europe and the United States and its position as a trading gateway between the West and Asia meant that mastering English was an important ability to be economically and socially mobile. In post-independence Singapore, English became the de facto business language, and its popularity was evidenced in the closure of Chinese language medium educational institutions, from primary to tertiary (Lee and Tan 1996). Graduates from Nanyang University who were educated in Mandarin were at times unable to find work because their degrees were not recognised (PuruShotam 1998). Jun Seng (Administrative Officer, 63), who left school with a secondary education, revealed to me in an interview

“In those times it was impossible to get a job if you didn’t speak English. All those Chinese speaking graduates couldn’t find work; they had to work as clerks or whatever, the same level as me.” Jun Seng (Administrative Officer, 63)

Being unable to speak English (and by that reasoning, being able to speak only either Mandarin or a Chinese dialect) meant that individuals were excluded from Singapore’s rapid economic growth. The ramifications of such exclusions remain today, with the majority of blue-collar Chinese Singaporeans using Mandarin or Dialect as their first language. Contemporary popular

¹ Chinese immigrants who arrived in Singapore in the 1900s found it economically useful to speak English, and some groups like the Hainanese drew especially upon British ethnic identifications to do business by running Western-style food restaurants, their ethnic lifestyle practices evidenced in recipes mixing imported European and Chinese ingredients together (Tan 2003).

media also tends to parody unsophisticated Chinese Singaporeans as having poor English skills, often relying on colloquial “Singlish” instead (Chua 2003).

State policy in Singapore has also focussed heavily on the creation of a single “Chinese” identity, which meant eroding the use of different Chinese dialects that were imported by migrants as they made their diasporic journeys. Street signs and building names were changed, babies’ names were Sinocised, and individuals looking for work as taxi drivers had to pass a Chinese proficiency test (Kong and Yeoh 2003). The result of all this was that individuals, especially first-wave migrants, found the world changing around them even as they did not. The popularity of English along with the eradication of dialects has left an entire generation of Chinese Singaporeans disconnected from contemporary society in general (Ang 2001), and opportunities for economic and social advancement in particular.