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The Lion Dances to the Fore: Articulating Chinese Identities in Penang and Medan

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Many Chinese families in Penang have relatives and trade relations with the Chinese in Medan and vice versa.¹ Communication between the two cities is facilitated by daily ferry services. The Chinese in Penang and Medan speak the same type of Hokkien dialect and share many common cultural and religious elements.² The majority of the Chinese migrated from Fujian Province (South China) in the nineteenth century as plantation coolies and tin miners and brought elements of Chinese culture such as temples, associations, rituals, and creative arts. The performing arts from China included the opera, puppet theatre, lion and dragon dances performed to honour temple deities, as well as instrumental ensembles and martial arts promoted by Chinese associations for the recreation of their members.

The governments of Indonesia and Malaysia have tried to integrate their Chinese population by promoting indigenous national identities. Indonesia has pursued general policies of cultural assimilation. Expressions of Chinese culture and the publication of newspapers and other materials in Chinese were banned in Indonesia by the Suharto regime beginning in 1967. Chinese religious observances could only be carried out in homes and temples, and it was only after the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998 that the Chinese performing arts could be performed in public. In the case of Malaysia, even though the Chinese are allowed to practice their culture and religion openly and to maintain their identity, the government has introduced affirmative *pro-bumiputera* and national culture policies (based on indigenous Malay culture) since the 1970s.

Despite the ban in Medan and the lack of government support or official recognition in Penang, the Chinese performing arts have survived. In fact there seems to be a revival in both cities. This paper looks at the revival of and the changes in the Chinese performing arts, specifically the lion dance or *barongsay* in Penang and Medan from the 1970s until the turn of the millennium as the Chinese communities adapt to the changing socio-historical and political conditions in the two cities.

Through the study of the lion dance, I intend to show that the performing arts provide spaces where Chinese of different backgrounds articulate and rework their identities according to the changing socio-political conditions at the national and international levels. The Chinese of Penang and Medan do not return to a “traditional past” as practiced by their forefathers in China. They have become citizens of the countries of their birth, and most do not look to China as their homeland. As they

adapt to the societies around them, certain traditions are selected for revival, transmitted and become emblems of ethnic identity. Authenticity is not particularly relevant as the cultural forms are continually being localized and transformed. While a few of the Chinese in diaspora may adopt “flexible identities” as some postmodern writers claim (Ong 1999; Ang 1993, 2001), most of them maintain and share certain cultural elements inherited from China which are constantly being indigenized. Nevertheless, the Chinese in diaspora maintain multiple identities, as they are not homogeneous and their identities shift according to the socio-political situation around them.

Origins, Significance and Types of Lion Dance

The majority of lion dance troupes in Penang and Medan perform the southern³ lion dance which was brought by the Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century.⁴ The lion head is made of *papier maché* glued over a bamboo framework and weighs about six kilos. The southern lion heads come in different colours and shapes. They are subdivided into the *Fo Shan Shi* (Fo Shan Lion) and the *He Shan Shi* (He Shan Lion) types. The former (the more popular form) is aggressive and energetic as the lion heads represent the three legendary heroes and blood brothers from the historical novel *The Three Kingdoms*. Yellow signifies Liu Bei who is known for his benevolence and generosity; red signifies Guan Gong (the God of War), known for his integrity and loyalty; while black signifies Zhang Fei, the general and businessman known for his courage but who easily gets angry. The lion head with seven colours represents Zhao Zi Lung, known for his intelligence and wisdom. The body of the southern lion consists of a long piece of cloth (about 6-7 feet) which is painted with colours following the main colours of the head. The lion is often accompanied by a comic character (wearing a mask of the smiling Buddha) who leads the way with a ball or fan.

Two dancers make up the lion: one manipulates the head while the other plays the posterior and tail. Lion dancers have to build up their bodily stamina to carry the lion head and to perform intricate tricks and acrobatic stunts. Apprentices begin by learning the rhythms of the drum, gong, and cymbals. They study the three main positions which form the basis of lion dancing: the parallel horse stand (standing position of the lion), the scissors stand (legs crossed at the knee), and the bow stand (for paying respect to the audience). When they have mastered these positions, they can play the tail end of the lion. Apprentices are only allowed to carry the lion head when they reach the age of fourteen after gaining experience at the tail end and when their bodies have matured.

Most southern lion troupes perform variations of a basic sequence called the *cai qing* (grabbing the green vegetable). As soon as it enters, the lion bows three

times (a sign of respect) to the audience. The lion then falls asleep to be awakened when it is bitten by lice. The lion scratches, shakes its legs because of the itch and tries to get the lice off by biting its body or leg. After walking around, it gets hungry and searches for food. The highlight of the performance is when the lion grabs the green vegetable (*cai qing*) to which a red packet (containing monetary donations) or *ang pow* is attached.⁵ The routine tests the skills of the dancers. The green vegetable is either hung from a high pole or placed in the center of a basin of water or somewhere else that is not easily accessible. The reputation of the southern lion dancers is based on their ability to overcome obstacles to get the *qing* or green vegetable.

The lion dance is accompanied by specific rhythms that accompany particular movements of the lion such as bowing, walking, climbing up a pole to grab the green vegetable, and so on. The ensemble consists of a one-sided barrel-shaped drum with springs inside the body to create a resonating timbre (*shigu*), cymbals (*bo*), and a flat gong (*luo*).⁶ Why is the lion dance important to the Chinese in Penang and Medan (and other parts of the world)? The Chinese regard the lion as a symbol of power and “the defender of religion and protector of sacred buildings.” As a result, “stone sculptures of a pair of lions squatting on their hind legs are often placed in front of the gates to temples and palaces” (Perkins 1999). (The female lion holds a cub and a male lion holds a ball.) Hence, lion dances are performed to protect the Chinese against evil spirits which might bring bad luck. The lion has a small mirror on top of its head as the mirror, when charged with *yang* energy, will repel evil spirits. It also has a coin attached which chases away all evil forces while the sharp horn is symbolic of one that is good at fighting (Lee 1986).⁷

As the protector of property, the lion dance is also believed to ensure good fortune and is essential during festivities such as Chinese New Year or before a new business is launched. It is significant that different heads representing specific values of the Chinese are selected for performances. In Penang, the yellow and red heads (which signify benevolence, good luck and courage) are usually used during Chinese New Year and temple celebrations, while the black head (signifying business acumen) is popular among businessmen, especially those who gamble (personal communication, Woo Chan, 1979). In Medan, red and yellow heads are employed during weddings or official opening of offices while black and red heads are often used to ward off evil spirits (personal communication, Lim Cien Kang, 2003).

The lion dance has an enduring appeal because it continues to resonate with the everyday experiences and beliefs of many Chinese in Penang and Medan. Like the lion dancer who has to train hard and experience danger to reach the *qing*, success and good fortune can only be achieved by the Chinese through hard work, discipline, and good luck (Carstens 1998: 41, 43). The performers also do not need to know

Mandarin or other Chinese dialects to perform the lion dance.⁸

Lion dance associations also appeal as they provide places for the young, especially the Chinese working class to interact, practice martial arts, socialize, and meet new friends. The activities and training promote cooperation and team work. The members can also earn some money through performances. As I shall show below, the lion has acquired a new function in recent times. It symbolizes the protection of Chinese culture and identity, particularly when pro-assimilationist policies predominate.

The Penang Lion: Unity, Spectacle and Professionalism

In Penang, the Chinese form the majority of the population (52% out of a total population of 1.15 million)⁹ and play an important role in Penang's political process. The ruling coalition is predominantly Chinese, and Penang is the only state in Malaysia which has a Chinese Chief Minister. Because of their large numbers, economic power, and political influence, the Chinese in Penang are able to exert influence over affairs concerning the Chinese as well as to collect money to build their own hospitals and Chinese-medium schools, to support Chinese cultural groups, and to publish their own Mandarin-language newspapers.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a rise of ethnic consciousness in Penang (as in the rest of Malaysia). Following the 1969 racial riots, policies were created by the Malaysian government to "restructure society." The New Economic Policy (NEP), an affirmative program in favour of the indigenous *bumiputera*, was introduced in 1971 to create a Malay commercial and industrial society. A national culture policy based on the cultures of the indigenous people was also implemented in an attempt to integrate the different ethnic groups. Consequently, the Chinese became even more aware of their separate identity and clung on to their traditions as symbols of identity. The national culture policy was thought to be assimilationist, leading to the demise of those cultures the government identified as "non-indigenous." Chinese cultural groups therefore came together in a united effort to revive the Chinese arts and to assert their identity. Traditional cultural emblems such as the Chinese lion dance, opera, orchestra, and other Chinese performing arts were promoted (Tan 1988, 2000).¹⁰ The lion dance in particular was selected for revival. Just as the lion was the defender of religion and protector of the community, the lion dance represented the protection and survival of Chinese culture.

State-wide associations like the Penang Chinese Martial Arts Association (with about 40 lion and dragon dance troupes as members) were formed in order to promote the sharing of musicians, performers and skills. Such organizations were able to offer the troupes some form of protection against unnecessary harassment by the authorities especially when applying for performance permits. Under Section

27(2) of the Police Act 1967, the police have the discretion to issue permits and impose conditions. All troupes have to provide the police with details of their performers as well as the duration and location of performances when applying for a permit. I have been told restrictions such as performance in a defined space rather than in procession in the streets were imposed because the lion dance has been associated with gangsterism and secret societies in Malaysia.

Should it be necessary, a state-wide organization could also protest more effectively. For example, in 1985, the Penang Chinese Martial Arts Association pulled out about 40 troupes and boycotted the Chingay procession at the Pesta Pulau Pinang (Penang Festival) when its representative was not included in the Pesta sub-committee, subsequent to which various restrictions were insisted upon in the performance of the lion dance (*New Straits Times*, December 27, 1985). Likewise, when then Home Affairs Minister, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, declared that the lion dance be changed to a “tiger dance” (“the tiger, unlike the lion, is found in Malaysia”) accompanied by music from the gong, flute, *tabla* or *gamelan*, widespread protest by the martial arts associations and Chinese cultural organizations of Penang and various parts of Malaysia was easily mounted (Ghazalie Shafie 1979: 7).¹¹

The revived interest and the coming together of different lion dance groups encouraged innovation and change. While the lion dance of the past was associated with secret societies, it managed to shed its shady image and became a symbol of Malaysian Chinese identity in the 1980s. The lion dance assumed new functions. Besides performances to ward off evil spirits and to usher in good luck, lion dances became part of fundraising campaigns for the educational and philanthropical activities of the Persatuan Perayaan Tiong Guan (Celebration of Tiong Guan Committee).¹² Since 1979, the Committee has raised funds for the Lam Wah Ee Hospital, the Chinese Assembly Hall and Chinese national-type primary schools such as Hun Bin Primary School (Tan 1988). Performances of lion dances were also staged to entertain tourists at the annual Penang Pesta (Penang Festival) Celebrations.¹³ They were performed to receive and welcome dignitaries, including politicians.

Interest in the lion dance promoted the development of new techniques and ways to obtain the *qing*. The green vegetable could be hung from a high place or placed on the floor. If the green vegetable was tied to a high pole, the lion was made to climb tables, walk through planks or climb the pole to reach it. If the green vegetable was placed on the floor, performers had to peel three oranges placed around it and throw and kick the peel in the air before eating the *qing*. Sometimes, lion dancers had to peel seven oranges, throw and kick them in the air, and pick up a coin from a bowl of water before eating the *qing*. Then the lion had to wipe the bowl with a towel to show that it had drunk the water. Other lion dancers had to

tiptoe over a maze of pots, earthenware, jars, bamboo poles or stools tilted at an angle to get to the *qing* which was placed in a bowl of water.

Lion dance associations also adapted to the lions in China and elsewhere. After watching the *gongfu* movie “Young Master” where a gold and red lion head was used, many troupes ordered the new lion head from China. The gold and red lion is popular during Chinese New Year as the colours represent wealth and gold (*Sunday Star*, January 24, 1982). Since the 1990s, gold and silver lions have also been used during competitions.



Photo 1 Lion Dance Competition, Penang

At the turn of the millennium, the lion is alive and well in Penang and further innovations have taken place. There is less red tape and it takes a shorter period to obtain performance permits as there appears to have been a liberalization of government policies towards non-Malay language, education and culture since the 1990s. The Prime Minister himself has campaigned for a *Bangsa Malaysia* which emphasizes multiculturalism¹⁴ (*The Star*, September 11, 1995). The lion dance has been incorporated into performances for state functions in Penang and is staged alongside other Malay cultural forms such as *boria*¹⁵ (Tan 2003).

Exposure to lion dance performances from China, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan through video recordings and international competitions has also encouraged innovation and change. Since the 1990s, Chinese cultural groups have emphasized that the promotion and preservation of the Chinese performing arts must go hand in hand with upgrading performance standards. This would also enable them to take

part in international competitions. Penang troupes have adopted the *meihua zhuang*, which was originally created in Malaysia for competition. In *meihua zhuang*, the lion sees a valley containing the beautiful *meihua* flower and wishes to enter the valley as the *qing* is attractive. The journey is dangerous. After bowing three times to the audience, the lion jumps up a series of 20-foot-high poles (representing hills) and crosses a bridge made of two ropes (to cross a river) before jumping up another high pole to grab the *qing*. Throughout the journey, the lion has to show that it is afraid of the danger involved, angry that the hills are so high, happy to play with the water in the river and to get the green vegetable as well as other emotions. After that, the lion has to make its return journey across the bridge and high poles before jumping to the ground again (personal communication, Wong Kien Kok, November 17, 2003).

The spectacular *meihua zhuang* is in line with current discourses on culture. As Malaysia tries to compete with the rest of the world and achieve the status of an industrialized country through Vision 2020, many cultural forms have been recreated grandiosely to project a Malaysia which is technically advanced with an identity of its own (Tan 2003). Lion dance groups in Penang also compete to create the largest troupe, consisting of over a hundred lions, for state functions and state Chinese New Year celebrations to dazzle local audiences and foreign tourists.

High-quality performances and competitions featuring the *meihua zhuang* have helped to raise the status of the lion dance and have stimulated interest among the Chinese community in Penang.¹⁶ As a result, more young people (as young as nine years of age) have been encouraged to actively learn and master the Chinese dance and music. Some Indians have also been attracted to join the lion dance troupes. Compared to Taiwan, China or Hong Kong, Malaysian lion dancers tend to “do more daring tricks involving great height ... the lion heads are much lighter.¹⁷ hence performances are livelier as performers can move faster and better” (*New Straits Times*, May 22, 1991).

The Medan Lion: Starting Again after Over 30 Years

The percentage of Chinese in Medan is smaller than that in Penang. They form 12% of the total population of two million (*Tempo*, April 30, 1994).¹⁸ According to the Population Census of 2001 (*Sinar Indonesia Baru*, August 1, 2002), the Chinese form the third largest group after Javanese and Batak Toba/Tapanuli. As the Chinese control a major proportion of the economy, many *pribumi* regard them with suspicion. Relations between the indigenous *pribumi* and the ethnic Chinese in Medan are tense and prone to violent outbreaks. No Chinese political party is allowed to exist in Medan.

In an attempt to resolve the “Chinese problem” (*masalah Cina*), the New Order under President Suharto introduced a series of regulations to accelerate the process of assimilation of the Chinese in Indonesia, including Medan. The expression of Chinese cultural elements (including the lion dance), Chinese language newspapers and publications (except for the official newspaper in Chinese), and the public worship of Chinese religions were banned through Keppres No. 14/ 1967 (Mely Tan 1991: 115-117; *Analisa Minggu*, January 26, 2003). Although this was not compulsory, many Chinese adopted Indonesian names at the suggestion of the Indonesian government (many kept their surnames). Formal Chinese education was banned in 1974. Chinese religious festivals and religion could only be celebrated within the confines of the home or the temple. It was only in 1998 when Gus Dur took over as President that the public expression of Chinese culture was allowed. In 2003, Chinese New Year (*Hari Raya Imlek*) was declared a national holiday for the first time after over 30 years for those who celebrated it (*Analisa Minggu*, January 26, 2003). Until recently, most children born after 1967 would not have had the chance to experience Chinese culture or entertainment performed live or in public.

Since the lifting of the ban on Chinese culture and after more than thirty years of inactivity, Chinese performing artists have been inspired to revive their traditions. Three lion dance (*barongsay*) troupes of the southern type re-emerged in Medan: Kumpulan Barongsay Chin Kun Tien, Kumpulan Barongsay Vihara Setia Buddha Binjai, and Kumpulan Barongsay Naga Mas 2000 (no longer active after 2003). Kumpulan Barongsay Chin Kun Tien is led by the 46-year-old Pak Ali (alias Song Tek Guan) who studied *barongsay* with his father for two years before it was banned. Kumpulan Barongsay Vihara Setia Buddha Binjai is taught by the 70-year-old Pak Law Bun Leng who had started learning the *barongsay* when he was eight years old.

Compared with the Penang troupes, which have reached international level, the lion dance troupes in Medan are in the process of reviving the form. Pak Ali (who is a medium of the deity Chin Khun Tien) set up his troupe in 2000 with a few members. He bought the instruments and the lion head from Malaysia. After three years, his troupe has grown. Rehearsals are held in the narrow lane in front of his temple (which doubles as his house). On the other hand, the Vihara Setia Buddha Binjai had been the center of *barongsay* in Medan since the 1950s. Its former members came together again to perform after the ban was lifted. Since then, the group has recruited new members and bought more lion heads and instruments from China as well as Malaysia. Today, the group has about 40 members (from the age of 14), 20 lion heads and two dragons.

Both groups rely on their memory of the basic techniques and movements to train the younger members. Pak Ali emphasizes that the horse stand (*teknik kuda-*

kuda), bow (*penghormatan*), raising of the head (*angkat kepala*), and flower movements (*gerakan bunga*) such as when the lion is happy or afraid form the bases of his training. Pak Law adds that the lion also needs to know how to behave when it is sad, angry, or sleeping. The 78-year-old Pak Lim Cien Khang, the treasurer of Vihara Setia Buddha, emphasizes that the lion has to scratch his head to show that it is cleaning itself after it has dirtied itself while trying to get the green vegetable.

To revive the *barongsay*, Pak Ali says that as many performances as possible should be held. His troupe accepts all invitations and tries to perform frequently (including on the roadside) so that people will have the opportunity to watch live performances. Pak Ali adds that “many Chinese in Medan have not seen a live lion dance performance (except on TV or VCD).” Pak Lim and Pak Law stress that during the Chinese New Year of 2003, the Vihara Setia Buddha Binjai paraded its 20 *barongsay* and 2 *naga* (dragons) in the streets of Binjai so that Chinese and non-Chinese could take part in the festivities. It is believed that the *barongsay* can ward off all evil and natural disasters and bring safety to the people of the town (*membawa keselamatan untuk warga kota*). As the lions entered houses, they were given red packets by the hosts. Many pulled a feather from the lion for keeping as these are believed to bring fortune, ward off evil, and cure sickness in small children. The lions were accompanied by musicians, masked comic characters, and a person acting as the deity Chai Sin, who is believed to bring fortune (*Analisa Minggu*, January 26, 2003).

The functions of the lion dance have also been localized in Medan. Besides Chinese New Year, opening of new offices and businesses, temple celebrations, and cleansing houses and shops of evil spirits (*cuci rumah, cuci kedai*), the lion dance is also performed to celebrate weddings, open Qur’anic reading competitions, and during the anniversary celebrations for radio stations. Political parties such as Partai Amanah Nasional have been said to stage lion dances to attract Chinese supporters.

As in Penang, interest in the lion dance has encouraged innovations and changes. Pak Ali’s troupe only performs on the ground (*main di darat*) because of the lack of space as practices are held in the small lane in front of his temple. He says that it is also too dangerous for the young performers to climb and dance on high tables. Unlike the group in Binjai which is sponsored by rich Chinese, he has no money to pay for hospital bills if his performers get hurt. To attract audiences, Pak Ali has introduced some innovations while performing on the ground (*di darat*). The lion dancers catch a crab, tear the skin of a coconut with their teeth, and rotate the lion head around 12 times as they try to get the red packet and green vegetable. The Binjai troupe is more daring and performs on the table (*main di meja*). The *qing* is hung on a pole under the table.



Photo 2 Lions at wedding celebration in Medan

The *barongsay* is popular in Medan today as the movements and rhythms are dynamic and the innovative ways of getting to the *qing* are challenging (*bertantangan*). The younger generation who cannot speak any Chinese dialect can also take part as language is not used in the lion dance. Pak Lim says that many people like to watch the lion dance because of the suspense. “The lion often looks like it is going to fall from the table but does not” (*singanya kadangkala nampak seperti mau jatuh dari atas meja tapi tak jatuh*). He hopes that other ethnic groups in Medan will begin to participate in the lion dance so that it can become a symbol of multiculturalism and unity (*symbol pembauran dan persatuan*) (*Analisa Minggu* January 26, 2003).

To raise the level of performance and to encourage further participation, a competition was held in 2001 at Pardede Hall, Medan. Seventeen troupes from Medan, Rantau Prapat, and Jakarta took part. Both Pak Ali and Pak Law believe that the lion dance will see further development in two to three years, if there are no changes to policies regarding Chinese culture. It is the aim of the Binjai troupe to join international competitions by that time. They are already beginning to learn the *meihua zhuang* (which they call *main di tiang*). They imitate the new movements by watching VCDs of international competitions.

Conclusion

Cultural identity formation and national belonging in the contemporary age is complex. Most Chinese, especially those who are born overseas, do not look to China as their homeland. They no longer distinguish themselves as *huaren* (overseas Chinese) but as *huayi* (descendants of Chinese migrants). Malaysian Chinese also

call themselves *Mahua* (Chinese of Malaysia) while Indonesian Chinese refer to themselves as *Yinhua* (Chinese of Indonesia). In recent times, the Chinese in Penang and Medan who have traveled to China for business or tours have reconfirmed that they are indeed different from the Chinese of the mainland as they have adapted to the societies around them. Some do not even speak Hokkien, Mandarin, or any other Chinese dialect. Others complain that the food in China is not spicy enough.

However, the expression and maintenance of Chinese culture and identity among those in diaspora remain important. Complete assimilation does not take place. In Medan, even though Chinese entertainment and culture were banned for over 30 years, Chinese food, medicine, and selected rituals continued to be practiced in some homes and temples. Chinese culture and music such as the lion dance have made a comeback following the lifting of the ban in the late 1990s.

Moreover, the extent of acculturation varies from one place to another. Bruner (1974: 255), who studied ethnicity in Medan and Bandung, argues that the “population ratio or social demography, established local culture and the locus of power are relevant to ethnic expression in any multi-ethnic group situation.” As Medan is a city of minorities and lacks a dominant culture, the Chinese there are less acculturated (although they speak fluent Bahasa Indonesia) than are the Chinese in other cities of Indonesia such as Jakarta or Bandung. The Chinese in Medan also keep close contact with the Chinese in Penang where Chinese culture is maintained. Many of the younger Chinese in Medan whom I met still speak the Hokkien dialect, celebrate festivals, and observe Chinese rituals even though public performances and celebrations were banned for over three decades. At the turn of the millennium, many teenagers are attracted to learn and perform the lion dance in the two active troupes.

The Chinese in Penang, who form the majority of the population on the island and have been educated in Chinese-medium schools, are even less acculturated to the dominant culture (when compared with the Chinese in Medan). As they exert economic and political power, the Penang Chinese are able to build their own hospitals and schools and to sponsor cultural clubs without the support of the federal government. There are more than 40 lion dance associations on the island. The Chinese are able to use their Chinese-based parties to organize themselves and to protest against injustice or certain regulations pertaining to their cultural rights.

“Chineseness” is also not fixed but constantly renegotiated and recreated. Chinese identities shift according to the political situation and the relationship between the Chinese and the dominant society. As ethnic consciousness heightened in the 1970s and 1980s, the Chinese in Penang stressed their distinctive identity. They clung on to and promoted their traditions and arts as symbols of ethnicity as they felt threatened by the affirmative pro-*bumiputera* National Economic Policy and the National Cultural Policy. In the 1990s, as liberalization occurred, there has

been a shift towards folklorization, grandiose spectacles, and professionalism to attract local audiences/foreign tourists as well as to compete in international competitions. More acculturation seems to be taking place as the Penang lions dance alongside other Malay and Indian dancers. A new *batik* lion has also been created (although it is not yet popular). In the case of Medan, following the ban on Chinese culture, the Chinese had to suppress their identity in public. As soon as the ban was lifted, Chinese identity was again expressed in the open through the lion dance, which is performed in the streets especially during Chinese New Year, rituals in temples, karaoke competitions in the hotels of Medan, and other forms of culture.

While it is true that Chinese identity is not fixed and is constantly being transformed, the Chinese in diaspora still share certain common features of cultural identity which have been brought by their ancestors from China. Ien Ang (1993: 14) has argued that the identities of the Chinese in diaspora are fluid or flexible and that “a postmodern notion of ethnicity ... can no longer be experienced as naturally based on tradition and ancestry.”

Nevertheless, this study of the lion dance has shown that Chinese identity in Penang and Medan is not completely “fluid” but is based on some aspect or form of tradition that was brought from China by the early migrants. The cultural forms are constantly being recreated as the Chinese adapt to the different societies in which they live and to the tenure of the times. Regardless of the application of permits and red tape (as in Penang) and even banning of the form (as in Medan), the lion dancers in both cities still maintain and promote the form today as it is believed that the lion is their protector; it ensures good fortune and chases away evil spirits. The lion dance is also a reminder that success is obtained not only if one’s luck is good but through hard work, discipline, and team spirit. The lion also symbolizes the protection of Chinese culture, especially when its survival is being threatened by pro-assimilationist policies.

Nevertheless, changes in functions, performance spaces and form have occurred in both cities. In Penang, lion-dance groups are striving to attain international standards by adapting to the spectacular *meihua zhuang*. They perform alongside other Malay forms of dance and theatre. The Medan lion dancers are introducing innovations to the basic techniques they still remember from the past. They learn new techniques by imitating movements they see on VCDs imported from Malaysia and China.

The lion dance and other Chinese performing arts are significant for both performers and audiences and are important sites for the expression of identity. In everyday life, the Chinese in both cities retain multiple identities. As a minority, they have to constantly negotiate with others in dominant society and other minorities to establish their space socially, politically and economically. When they come together to practice or perform the lion dance, they are able to interact with

other Chinese, distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups around them, and express their identity for a short period.

While the expression of and the right to express one's Chinese identity through the performing arts and other forms of Chinese culture is important to the Chinese in diaspora, authenticity is not particularly relevant. The lion dance speaks for the continuity as well as the transformation of a tradition which emblemizes the shifting identities of the Chinese in diaspora.

Notes

- 1 This paper is based on the findings of a two-year research project entitled "Negotiating and Reinventing Identities: Survival and State of the Chinese Performing Arts and Music in Penang and Medan" sponsored by the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) which is jointly funded by the Toyota Foundation and the Japan Foundation Asia Center. I would like to thank Emmi Simangunsong of Nommensen University, Medan, for her assistance in interviewing lion dance specialists in Medan and Binjai.
- 2 Historically, the Chinese are divided into two main categories: 1) *Peranakan* in Medan or *Baba* and *Nonya* in Penang who comprise Chinese of mixed ancestry who have adopted certain features of indigenous culture including language, dress and food; and 2) *Totok* (in Medan) comprising those who are oriented towards Chinese culture and speak Mandarin or a Chinese dialect. The latter form the majority of the Chinese population in both cities. The distinction between the two is decreasing as the younger generation of the former category becomes more sinicized while members of the latter become more localized.
- 3 By comparison, the northern lion which was also brought to Malaya in the early twentieth century is more realistic in form and looks more like a real animal. In Penang some troupes perform the northern lion, but no such troupes existed in Medan at the time of fieldwork. The northern lion looks like a lion with fur on its body, tail, and feet and likes to play around like a real animal. It is known to perform acrobatics such as jumping on tables or walking on balls and see-saws. Perfection is measured by the degree of realism in portraying the movements of the lion as well as the intricacy of the stunts.
- 4 Some lion-dance troupes also practice the dragon dance. The dragon symbolizes strength and goodness and appears on the Emperor's robes, lanterns, urns, joss sticks, temples, and so on. It is also believed to drive out evil and bring order. The dragon dance is usually performed to ensure a good harvest and that there will be enough rain. In performance, the dragon (supported by 6-7 people) often chases a "pearl" ("fireball" on a pole carried by a performer). It also symbolizes unity as many individuals have to unite to form a single body. The martial behaviour of the dragon is believed to protect the community.
- 5 It is believed that *qing* also refers to the Qing or Manchu Dynasty. The lion dance was used by revolutionaries to exchange information and to pass money to their leaders. Lion dancers were said to shout *cai qing* as a revolutionary password. *Cai qing* literally refers to "grabbing the green vegetable" or "grabbing the Qing Dynasty."
- 6 For an in-depth discussion of the music and instruments of the lion dance, see Matusky

and Tan (2004).

- 7 It has been reported that during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279), lion dances accompanied by loud percussion music were performed to chase away the enemy as the noise frightened their horses and elephants (Perkins 1999).
- 8 I am told that by comparison, the Chinese opera and puppet theatre employs stylized Hokkien, Teochew or Hainanese dialects that are difficult to master.
- 9 Figures of 1990 printed in Penang Development Corporation, *Statistics Penang Malaysia*, n.d. Chinese make up 26% of the total population of Malaysia.
- 10 In an earlier study, I have shown how the Phor Tor Festival or Hungry Ghost festival was celebrated on a large scale in Penang in the 1980s. Throughout the seventh lunar month, there were performances of Chinese opera, puppet theatre and *ko-tai* (song stage) every night in some part of Penang. Politicians and educators went on stage to speak about Chinese culture and education. Money was collected for the building of Chinese schools and hospitals (Tan 1988).
- 11 In Kuala Lumpur, a lion-dance federation was formed in 1974 following the Prime Minister's visit to China (restoring diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China). The federation promoted its revival and development of techniques. National lion-dance competitions were also organized by the Malaysian Federation of Chinese Martial Arts Associations. When the first competition was held in 1983, 39 troupes took part. In 1984, 102 troupes challenged one another. By 1986, 300 troupes from different states competed for honours (*Star*, January 22, 1986).
- 12 Established in Penang in 1979, the state-wide organization was set up to render assistance to the 120-odd areas that celebrated the Hungry Ghost Festival when they applied for government permits from the Health Department, Police, Fire Brigade, Building Department, and Engineering Department. In 1980, when a security deposit of RM \$1000 was required for each area by the Land Office, the Committee acted as the guarantor for all areas.
- 13 In the 1970s and 1980s, lion-dance troupes in Wilayah Persekutuan and Selangor collected money for the private college Kolej Tengku Abdul Rahman and the Malaysian Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis (*New Straits Times*, December 10, 1984).
- 14 More Mandarin and Cantonese programs are shown on national and privatized television. Chinese dances are included in National Day parades and performances for tourists (Tan 2003).
- 15 The *boria* is a type of popular Malay theatre in Penang which alternates singing (about topical issues) and sketches. See Matusky and Tan (2004).
- 16 Malaysian troupes have reached a high level of performance. Since 1996, they have been winning gold medals in international competitions held at the Genting Highlands which are organized by the Gabungan Tarian Naga dan Singa Malaysia (Malaysian Federation of Dragon and Lion Dance).
- 17 Lion heads made in Malaysia especially by the East Ocean Trading Co. in Johore (set up in 1983) are known to be of high quality, refined, and much lighter. They are exported to other parts of Asia.
- 18 Chinese make up 3% of the total population of Indonesia.

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Pak Lim Cien Khang (78 years old), Bendahari, Yayasan Vihara Setia Buddha, Binjai (January 25, 2003; February 23, 2003).