CHAPTER TWELVE

The Limits of Chinese Transnationalism:
The Cultural Identity of Malaysian-Chinese
Students in Guangzhou

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[D]ifferences between cultural styles of life and communication, despite a similar economic base, will remain large enough to require separate serving, and hence distinct cultural-political units, whether or not they will be wholly sovereign.

Ernest Gellner (1983: 119)

Introduction

In November 2007, two street protests by Malay Indians in Kuala Lumpur revealed that the Malaysian government had failed to tackle the problem of ethnic marginalization in the eyes of ethnic Indians. It was a rare event to witness thousands of ethnic Indians marching down the street and confronting riot police. The ethnic Chinese did not join the protests and the leaders of the Chinese business communities discouraged their members from doing so. Yet the Chinese are also unhappy with the treatment they receive from bumiputra Malays. As Lim Kit Siang, the Chinese head of the opposition Democratic Action Party, remarked, “Now, everything is separate, and non-Malays feel like second-class citizens in their own country” (Beech, 2007: 31). Lim had served in the National Parliament since 1969, and he stated that the current ethnic tension was worse than
that in the 1970s, even though the national economy had witnessed a steady growth over the past two decades (ibid.).

The problem of ethnic marginalization and the ethnic cleavage between Malays and Chinese has been widely studied by scholars. In Malaysia, each ethnic group maintains its own culture and most social conflicts are coined in ethnic terms. The state’s “pro-Malay” policies have institutionalized the ethnic difference between *bumiputra* (Sons of the [Malaysian] Soil) and non-*bumiputra*. Malaysian higher education is an important domain in which the state favors the *bumiputra* Malays against the ethnic Chinese and Indians (Cohen, 2000; Lee, 2002: 5–6). Consequently many well-off Chinese families send their children to study in the West in order to get a higher degree and to secure permanent residence abroad (Pong, 1993: 247; Sin, 2006). As both the rapid expansion of the Chinese economy and the growing economic ties between China and Southeast Asia have changed this picture in recent years, Malaysia is now China’s seventh largest trading partner, and bilateral trade has increased by 258 percent since 1999, equivalent to US$18.8 billion (Beech, 2005). Many less well-off Malaysian-Chinese parents are now keen on sending their children to study in mainland China.

This chapter examines the transnational experience of a group of young Malaysian-Chinese students at Jinan University in the city of Guangzhou in South China. Due to a lack of educational opportunities in Malaysia, these young Malaysian-Chinese become “reluctant exiles” as they pursue higher education in China, the homeland of their ancestors. Their transnational experience in China, especially the social encounters with mainland Chinese, is a key to understanding the configuration of their national, ethnic, and cultural identities (Ong, 1999: 17). Beginning with a critical account of the status of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and their strong ties with mainland China, this chapter discusses the identity problems that a group of young Malaysian-Chinese encountered while studying in Guangzhou. The study draws on qualitative, in-depth interviews to examine their perceptions of “Chineseness,” their critiques of Malaysian identity politics, and the emergence of a transnational identity.

**Ethnic Chinese in Malaysia:**
**Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and Class**

Three analytical approaches can be discerned in the study of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. The first approach focuses on the cultural