

CHAPTER THREE

CHINESE CULTURE AND PRACTICES

3.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of Chinese culture and practices and will discuss certain aspects of Chinese culture and practices of relevance to this study. The review of literature for this chapter does however, represent some rules of selection as Chinese culture is too complex and immense a topic to be covered by a study of this nature. The discussion for this chapter will focus on an important domain of Chinese culture which is the family with its ten sub-domains based on Chinese values such as filial piety, reverence for elders, humility, collectivism and openness, face, self-control and emotional restraint and love for education and knowledge. Included in the discussion are: religious beliefs, harmony, language and identity as well as current trends and the rise of China.

3.1 Origins and Cultural Development

The Chinese name for China, *Zhongguo*, was first seen in documents from as early as 1100 BC – 221 BC during the Zhou Dynasty. It refers to the capital of the nation as in ancient times, the ruler built his kingdom in the middle of the land surrounded by vassal states, big and small. China was also called *Huaxia* (flourishing and glorious China), *Zhongyuan* (Central Plains), *Shenzhou* (the divine land), *Jiuzhou* (nine administrative divisions) (Gateway to Chinese culture, 2003).

China, the most populous nation in the world, is home to 1.3 billion people (Ke, 2003; Ong, 2005; Yen Mah, 2008). It prides itself with having a history that spans for more than 5,000 years. Thus, the Chinese people greatly revered their historical past and are proud that they are a people with over 4,000 years of continuous existence. From its inception to the present day, Chinese culture has been passed down from generation to

generation despite many changes of government. Thus, the bond of the empire was cultural and racial distinctions was less significant than in other regions of the world. Latourette (1934) traces it to the existence of a particular kind of culture among Chinese that functions as a tie for homogeneity such as adopting Confucian patterns of conduct of family and community life instead of blood kinship or ancestry.

The Chinese Language is viewed to be the only ancient language that remains in existence in its ideographic form till the present time (Ke, 2002). Ke (2002) stated that one must master a command of some 3.000 characters to accomplish routine reading in Chinese. Some characters require 26 brush strokes which must be drawn in the correct order. According to Nelson, Broadberry and Wang (2001), today's Chinese "alphabet" consists of 214 "radicals" for traditional characters and 226 radicals to write the simplified characters. Nelson, Broadberry and Wang are of the belief that valuable information can be obtained through a study of Chinese ancient classical writing which has been miraculously preserved over the millenia.

The main philosophies of China which include Confucianism, Taoism, Legalist, Mohist and Strategist all came into being during the Spring and Autumn, and warring states periods. Chinese philosophies include that of not taking wealth by unjust means, contentment in life, the transience of riches and interdependence of disaster and fortune.

Special events such as marriage, birth of a child, birthdays and even death are celebrated by the Chinese. To the Chinese, being able to live a full and rich life and die peacefully is cause for celebration so Chinese funerals may not be events that are entirely somber and sad. According to Lip (1993), the most important time of the year is the first day in the Chinese Lunar calendar which is known as *xin nian* (New Year) by the Chinese. The Lantern festival or the moon festival, is another festival that is celebrated by the Chinese yearly, it is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. Currently, the

festivals and cultural activities mentioned are still practiced not only by Chinese in China but outside China as well.

3.2 Chinese Cultural Domain

The discussion on Chinese cultural domain encompasses the theme of family and its characteristics, values, practices and religious beliefs.

3.2.1 Family

The family has long been regarded as the most basic characteristic of the Chinese institution and many ideas about the Chinese family and what it constitutes today are influenced by the teaching of Confucius. Latourette (1934) is of the view that the family has been more emphasized among the Chinese than among other races as it plays a leading role in economic life, social control, moral education and government. This view is also confirmed by Hoobler (1993) because the family participates as a group in the areas mentioned. Bond (1991) attributes this to societies where there are no government sponsored social welfare and which are characterized by relatively stable residence. Consequently, the family is the only constant in a world that is impermanent and indifferent. Thus, this concept is constantly stressed and nourished throughout the life span of each individual. Lin (2000) states that the family colours all Chinese social life and is regarded as the model for the government and state. This is also in keeping with Yow (2006) who stated that the typical Confucian tradition is to view the family as the foundation of the state and therefore the source of social values. The term *guo-jia* is in fact a direct transition from the term *jia* or family to the *guo* or state and hence the successive states of human organization.

Traditional Chinese families are patriarchal and hierarchical in nature. From the patriarchal aspect, the head of the family is the grandfather or the father and each family member knew his or her position, role and responsibilities. Much authority and power is vested in the head of the family and therefore, all decisions are made by the head of the family. The

traditional Chinese household would only be headed by the grandmother or mother when both the grandfather and father were dead. Members of the family are required to listen, submit and obey to the instructions of the head or their elders.

However, in this traditional order, De Mente (2000) comments that “obligations owed by the inferiors to the superior were not reciprocal” as it was “designed to serve an authoritarian social system” with a population that was divided into specific classes. Consequently, people in the top ranks of the social hierarchy took advantage of those below. Thus, those in the lower hierarchy would have to obey and serve more people and have very little options with the consequence that the lowest status in the family hierarchy is that occupied by the youngest female child. The insignificant position of women in traditional Chinese society is represented in the *san cong* or the three obediences where women play subservient roles throughout their lives as they have to submit to the authority of their father, husband and son.

According to Lin (2000), the family functions like a state in the West as it educated its youth, provides for the unemployed, disciplines its erring members, as well as supports the old and aged. Hence, the subordination of the later generation to the earlier, the younger to the elder and female to male form the basis for the traditional Chinese family. According to Rappa & Tan (2003), the patriarchal structure of the Chinese family is replicated at all levels of Chinese society. W.J.F. Jenner (1992) likens the Chinese family to an “authoritarian structure” which is determined by factors such as seniority, sex and closeness to the “patrilinear relationship.” It also fosters respect for authority resulting in individuals who are trapped in submissive positions and attitudes.

Following the Confucian concept of proper relationship, the hierarchical nature of the Chinese family is observed in the following five fundamental human relations. According to Lee (1983), except for the relationship between the teacher and pupil, no relationship exists beyond the five mentioned below:

- i) husband and wife
- ii) father and son
- iii) brothers (brothers and sisters)
- iv) sovereign and subjects
- v) friends

From the above discussion, the family is viewed to be the pivot of Chinese life. Hence, the researcher has chosen it as the central theme or domain for the Family Descriptor Scale (cf. Chapter 4, section 4.6.3).

3.2.1.1 Chinese Values

Chinese values which have been placed as aspects or sub-domains of the Chinese family include the following aspects: centrality of family relationships, filial piety, reverence for elders, education, face, openness, humility, self-control, emotional restraint (moderation) and collectivism as well as religious and moral values. The above sub-domains have been chosen as they are viewed relevant to the Malaysian Chinese, who are diasporic Chinese who display the tendency to hold tenaciously to their language and parent culture (Pan, 2000). Although there are many traits and qualities that have been attributed to the Chinese, only certain characteristics are highlighted for purposes of this research.

3.2.1.1.1 Centrality of family relationship

De Mente (2000) comments that for more than four thousand years, the Chinese cultural practice was to deemphasize the individual but emphasize the supremacy of the family and group. Consequently, the Chinese are notable for their orientation towards family centredness such as through extended family structures. Johnson (2000) attributes family centredness for lower divorce rates among Asians compared to the general population of Americans as family disruptions are frowned upon. Embedded within the idea of family centredness is the idea of filial piety, loyalty and obedience which result in the habit of subordination and acceptance of authority (Chen & Chung, 1994).

Latourette (1934) writes that most Chinese felt their loyalty was first to the family rather than the state. Therefore, if a man siphons money from the state to benefit his family, his dishonesty was condoned. Thus, within the family, mutual helpfulness is brought to a very high degree fueled by a sense of moral obligation and family honour. Lin (2000) comments astutely that family consciousness supersedes social and national consciousness. Consequently, Lin (2000:181) satirically commented, “Deep down in our instincts we want to die for our family, but we do not want to die for our state. None of us ever want to die for the world.” Likewise, Bond (1991) states that the Chinese are intensely involved with their family and old friends but indifferent to strangers or those not connected by long association. Thus, a Chinese person takes personal pride in the success of person or persons within his or her intimate circle and shame in their failures.

3.2.1.1.2 Filial piety

Lee (2003) concurs with Pan (2000), De Mente (2000) and Lin (2000) that filial piety is regarded as the utmost important of all virtues to the Chinese. Pan (2000) stated that filial piety was central to the pattern of Chinese society and was seen in the great reverence shown to parents while they were alive and worshipping their spirits when they were dead. De Mente (2000) views it as one of the greatest virtues of the Chinese culture while Pye (cited in Rappa and Tan, 2003) attributes it as the most striking of characteristics with regard to the Chinese family. Hence, Smith (1986:71) is of the view that to enumerate the characteristics of the Chinese without mentioning filial piety is unthinkable. According to Pan (2000), the keeping of genealogical records was a result of ancestor worship.

Lin (2000) traces the origin of the Chinese word for culture or religion, *chiao*, to the word for filial piety, *xiao*. It is written with the sign for filial piety plus a causative radical which connotes the meaning of ‘making filial’ as explained by the *Xiaojing* – the classic for Filial Piety. Thus, Confucius teaches that filial piety is the basis of virtue which is the origin of culture. The beginning of filial piety was simply in keeping the body and hair in pristine

condition as it was a biological inheritance from parents. It has been reported that the above teaching of Confucius is just as influential even when the Chinese have migrated overseas (Ho: 1986). The idea of reciprocation being visited upon the descendents is mirrored in the view forwarded by Rattenbury (1949:145) who states that treatment of elders is an act which will be passed on as it is reflected in the saying, "as you treat your father and he his, so your sons will be likely to treat you."

In the discussion of filial piety, the mention of posterity is needful. Mencius (372-289B.C.) said, "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them" (Smith 1986: 187). Rattenbury (1949) observes that Chinese love children especially sons and concludes that it is therefore unfilial for a Chinese man to be without sons as sons provide the link in binding generations through the perpetuation of the family name. Thus, several writers such as Smith (1986), Tung (1961), Rattenbury (1949) to name a few, are of the view that perpetuation of the family is bound up with ancestral worship which further enhanced the authority of the family head. Tung (1961:20) explains the character *fu* or father by quoting the *Shuo wen*, the earliest Chinese dictionary. The character *fu* is formed by a hand holding a stick which symbolizes the head's coercive powers.

Thus, a discussion of filial piety would not be complete without the mention of authoritarianism. Pye (cited in Rappa and Tan, 2003) relates filial piety to an individual's sense of identity and his attitudes with regard to authority. Filial obligation is an absolute requirement regardless of the quality of parental behaviour consequently, a child is taught to respect, honour and obey his parents without reservations throughout the lifetimes of his parents. Consequently, Pye is of the view that the practice of filial piety and its resultant authoritarianism has resulted in making people who are conformists as relationships are defined in terms of rigid and precise roles and respect for absolute authority.

According to Bond (1991:36), the attitude of authoritarianism also involves a general tendency of deference to people who are in a position of power, status or in control. It is manifested in the form of “dogmatic or rigid behaviour, respect for tradition, obedience to political dictates and literal interpretation of rules.” Deference to authority is perceived to be upright, prudent and beneficial to the society at large.

3.2.1.1.3 Reverence for elders

In traditional Chinese families, tremendous emphasis is placed on respect towards elders and seniors. Beginning with the parents, children must be filial towards their parents. Thus, children were taught to greet their parents and elders every morning and when eating, seniors should start first. Lin (2000) observes that well bred Chinese would not offend an old person gratuitously. Although some of the fine feeling may not be present now but a great part of it still remains in Chinese families.

3.2.1.1.4 Face

Ke (2002) states that the Chinese regard “face” as how others view or judge them individually or as a family. It is often an individual’s interpretation of how others think of him or his family in a particular issue of matter. Godablatt in (cited in Wang, 2000) equates the notion of “face” to shame and defines it as honour, prestige or reputation.

Latourette (1934) states that face is a feature which is peculiar to the Chinese. Face has been important in the relation of Chinese with one another. Young (1994) affirms that face is deeply embedded into the core of the Chinese’s psyche and it is social capital which is confirmed by both Lip (1993) and Lee (1983). De Mente (2000) explains that to get things done in China, every Chinese person and group is compelled to nurture and establish an extensive network of personal connections which depended on a form of “social credit” (lian). As a result, this social system has led to an obsessive sensitivity about face and whatever thing that made one feel bad or look bad will have repercussions on the

individual or group which necessitated quick apologies. Thus, face is regarded as collective property by King and Bond (1985) since it is entwined with other's face. This is reflected in the Chinese elders admonishment to the young "Don't lose face for us." De Mente (2000) is of the view that the Chinese sensitivity to face is as strong today as it was in the imperial times as face is still the primary factor in all relationships.

3.2.1.1.5 Humility

Humility has been viewed as an important trait in Chinese behaviour. To illustrate the above characteristic, Ross (1990) quotes Confucius's definition of the noble man or "gentleman" as:

The noble man is affable but no flatterer... He is dignified without pride. He is easy to serve, but difficult to please... He conceals his virtues ...He meditates on virtue.

(Ross, 1990: 109)

Confucius views the noble man to be sincere, humble and virtuous. Only through humility can one achieve true greatness as Lee (1986) attests, humility is reflected in both the oral and written form of the Chinese language. Ling (1995) and Lee (1986) forward the example of children referring to their peers as "elder brother" and those who are of their father's generation as "uncle." Consequently, the Chinese view haughtiness and arrogance to be the most offensive as it indicates a lack of upbringing by the transgressor. De Mente (2000) states that Chinese tradition conditioned the Chinese to maintain a low profile and a modest front in dress and behaviour. Although the Chinese stresses greatly on humility, ironically, Lin (2000) views the Chinese to be a proud race of people.

3.2.1.1.6 Self-control and emotional restraint (moderation)

According to Lin (2000), central to the teaching of Confucianism is the spirit of reasonableness or common sense which is the source of the "Doctrine of the Golden Mean." Cultivation of the reasonable man as a model of culture was the aim of Chinese classical education. Therefore, an educated man should be a reasonable person, guided

by common sense, moderation and self-restraint and should distance himself from abstract theories and logical extremes. In sum, the Chinese man of culture who adheres to the Doctrine of the Golden Mean should have no excesses of theory and conduct and is able to maintain balance in all situations. Two Chinese characters have been forwarded to mirror this characteristic of moderation, which is *chungho*, which means not extreme or harmonious and the Chinese word for self-restraint is *chieh* which means control to the proper degree. Lin quotes the Shuking (Book of History) which highlights the importance of this principle through Emperor's Yao advice to his successor to always hold to the mean (moderation).

3.2.1.1.7 Collectivism

Collectivism is defined as the social unit observed in family and community activities, political orientations as well as attitudes toward work and success. Hence, great effort was expended towards homogenizing people to think and behave as a group. De Mente (2000) comments that individualism was regarded as immoral and non-Chinese. Group esteem is considered to be important as opposed to self-esteem so the sense of self was downplayed to the extent that it virtually did not exist.

De Mente (2000) highlights the facet of culture which differentiates the Chinese from Westerners as the concept of self. He attributes this cultural factor to individualism or the lack of individualism. Nisbett (2003) observes that the Chinese has no word for "individualism" which is also observed by Johnson (2000) who stated that there is no word in the Chinese language to either name or describe concepts of privacy and individuality. Nisbett (2003) concurs with De Mente (2000) who states that the Chinese word for individualism, *gerenzhuyi*, which means one-person doctrine signifies selfishness or being immoral. De Mente attributes the above view to the fact that the heart and soul of Chinese society was based on group consciousness and behaviour. This is in keeping with

Hoobler's (1993) view that the family functions as a group. Thus, individualism was viewed as a sin against society and was severely punished.

Lin (2000) states that the family which is so central to Chinese behaviour, thought and social life, is the negation of individualism. He explains that the family holds a man back and likens the family to a jockey holding back a dashing Arabian horse for the simple reason that Chinese society does not need fine Arabian thoroughbreds. This view is also mirrored by Nisbett (2003) who states that there is cultural prejudice against individuality among East Asians as seen in the following proverb, "The peg that stands out is pounded down."

3.2.1.1.8 Education

The continued existence of ancient China till today has been ascribed to the fact that China honoured the scholar above the man of war and the honored men of China trusted chiefly in moral forces while the nations that trusted the sword perished ages ago (Ross, 1990). Thus, education has been viewed to be central to Chinese tradition and family lives for centuries (Yow, 2006). It was highly prized by the ancient Chinese and is evident in the classification of ancient Chinese society into four classes based on priority and importance to the nation. Lee (1986) states that scholars occupied top position because they form the ruling class. Education and scholarship were therefore distinct factors which separated the ruling classes from the ruled. Thus, the Confucian belief that at birth, people are the same but learning makes the difference (De Bary and Chafee, 1989) is held by most Chinese and associated with the high level to achieve among Chinese (Crandall et al., 1965). Yow (2006) stated that education has been a proven pathway to success and fortune as no other pursuit provide such hopes, aspirations and opportunities and is still highly priced by the Chinese till today.

When Confucianism became the state religion, Hoobler (1993) states that Confucianism became the foundation of the Chinese education system for a period of two thousand years. Yow (2006) attributes this to the Confucianist view of education holding the key to solving socio-political and interpersonal problems. The often quoted words of Confucius regarding education are as follows: “Study as if you were never to master it, as if in fear of losing it.” Hoobler (1993: 12) comments that, “No people were ever given greater incentive to study, for the one way to attain power and influence was through government service.” This was observed in the introduction of the imperial examination about 1,500 years ago in China to enlist the best and smartest scholars for government service. Therefore, Hoobler (1993) states that no civilization ever prized education as highly as the ancient Chinese. Yow (2006) points to the high regard for education by the Chinese by referring to the Yong Le encyclopaedia, known as the *Yongle Dadian* which abounds with sayings on education. It was published in the 14th century and was a result of the work of 3,000 scholars and contains about 22,877 volumes, which amounted to some 380 million words.

3.2.2 The Chinese Mindset and collective wisdom

Historical events and personalities have been considered to be the primary source of contribution to the Chinese mindset (Yow, 2006). Chinese sayings, proverbs and poetry which have been passed down from generation to generation remain relevant and important today and they form what is known as the Chinese psyche. Thus, Yen Mah (2003) states that the Chinese is most impressed to hear a proverb timely quoted.

3.2.1.1 Words of wisdom

Yow (2006) is of the view that there are more quotable quotes from ancient classical Chinese than from any other language. He attributes many factors which were advantages to its preservation, some of which are: the early development of the Chinese language, invention of printing and paper, the large population as well as the political stability which

promoted huge quantities of work which featured memorable quotes. Though circumstances have changed, these quotes have remained as basic human nature and interpersonal relationship remains unchanged.

3.2.1.2 Proverbs

Yow (2006) is of the view that Chinese teachers and parents often spoke about and use a huge range of Chinese proverbs and important sayings. Thus, citation of proverbs which summarize past legends continues to exert a particular emotive appeal to the Chinese and continues to play a major role in the expression of Chinese thoughts (Yen Mah, 2003). Yow (2006) explains that it is not an easy matter to master Chinese proverbs as usage is often a reflection of an individual's command of the language itself. Chinese proverbs, sayings, cultural values, expressions and judgments as well as their underlying thoughts are transmitted through education. Therefore, understanding of proverbs serves as a useful insight into the cultural sensitivities, reasoning, mentality, psyche and well as cultural sensitivities of a race. Yen Mah (2003) states that correct usage of proverbs illustrate aspects of human behaviour that reflect the very essence of human existence. Hence, ancient proverbs continue to influence the thoughts and behaviour of the Chinese today and is viewed "as a barometer of a Chinese person's knowledge of history, level of education and depth of wisdom (Yen Mah, 2003).

3.2.1.2.1 Role of Chinese history and proverbs

Yen Mah (2003) is of the view that on the historic occasion when Deng Xiaoping signed the agreement with Britain's Margaret Thatcher for the return of Hong Kong to China, he uttered an evocative proverb, "lui ye gui gen" (falling leaves return to their roots) which appropriately expressed the sentiments of over a billion Chinese. She stated that this is but one of the many examples of proverbs used by Chinese leaders to illustrate lessons

learned from history as the best proverbs are products of history. Thus, the Chinese probably revere their ancestors and history more than any other race.

To understand the Chinese way of thinking, Yen Mah (2003) is of the opinion that it is essential to realize that the Chinese view of the world is dependent on the lessons learned from ancestors in history which is encapsulated in the form of four characters and presented as proverbs. Yen Mah states that Chinese proverbs originate from ancient historical literature, poetry, letters and other writings. They are based on actual events and thus carry philosophical or moral messages which accounts for their relevance in contemporary life.

3.2.3 Harmony

To the Chinese, harmony translates as absolute obedience to the governing authorities through maintenance of peace by not upsetting the hierarchical order of things. To do so it is needful to put one's feelings and interests below that of the family and others. It also meant knowledge of one's roles and fulfilling all obligations without questions.

"He" or harmony also represents balance and things being "right" which contributes to harmonious feelings. De Mente (2000) is of the view that the element of harmony could be observed in virtually every conversation and behaviour of the Chinese especially in negative or irrational actions to maintain harmony for harmony's sake. However, it is more a representation or creation of the intellect as it has little relevance in reality.

3.3 Trends and Development as well as the rise of China

After two centuries of decline, the emergence of China as a world power enabled the Chinese who have gone through a period of deep adversity to finally find solace and renewed pride in their nation. Ong (2005) observes that China today is deviating from Communism and has been deemed as wise by most observers of China today. Benson (2002) comments that although Chinese society has changed dramatically from the past

yet patterns of the past remains. Its patriarchal attitudes continue as male children are still valued above female children as seen in the lopsided female-male ratio in the 1990-2000 demographics. Although the various laws in China accorded women equal status, patriarchal attitudes have yet to make a retreat.

De Mente (2000) likens government enterprises in present day China to hybrid organizations which are a combination of Confucianism, Communism and Socialism. Although these companies are run on the traditional concept of the family, it has inherited much of the weaknesses inherent in all the three systems mentioned as the concept of *Jia* as advocated by Sun Tzu for effective organization of structure was not adhered to.

Lee & Lee (2006) attribute the emergence of China as one of the most striking developments of the late twentieth century as some are of the view that there is no parallel to her emergence. Lee & Lee (2006) quote Huntington (1996) to support their view that China is no ordinary player. Lam & Graham (2007) is of the view that with the exception of the United States, China is the only important single market in existence today. This is due to the dramatic economic and social changes occurring in China today as she began to actively seek for economic ties with the industrial world. Lam & Graham (2007) quote analysts who predict that with an annual gross national product (GNP) growth of 8-10 percent average for the next 10-15 years, China's GNP would equalize with the United States by 2015. It is predicted that in the long run, the economic strength of China will be observed not in the area of exports but rather as a vast market. Her economic strength has been likened to that of the U.S. which is driven by domestic demand. In fact, it is a relatively poor nation going through a process of transformation from a socialist market system to a hybrid socialist-free market system, which is far from completion and "with the rules of the games still being written" (Lam & Graham, 2007: 56). Trade with the world has led not only to economic prosperity but peace for China at this point of time. The rise of China is viewed to have a great impact on South East Asia, and the impact is expected to

increase even more in the near future. For many Chinese who live outside China, identification with China is no longer political but cultural (cf. chapter 2, section 2.1.2). Accordingly, the concept of cultural China which is strengthened by its meteoric rise in the world today, serves to create harmony among Chinese all over the world (Hou, 2006).

3.4 Summary and Conclusion

The discussion of Chinese cultural domains focussed on the Chinese family with its values, practices and beliefs. Although times have changed, these values, practices and beliefs continue to exert great influence on the Chinese today, more so with the rise of China in the world today.