

Travel Fellowship Application

Identities in Motion

To what extent does migration alter the national, ethnic, and personal identities of the ethnically Chinese in Southeast Asia?



Applicants:

Anmei Zeng

Nicole (Eng Wei) Quah

Fellowship Description

Our journey involves two travelers moving across Singapore, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Jakarta, and Manila. In this travel fellowship, we propose to explore the question: ***To what extent does migration alter the national, ethnic, and personal identities of the ethnically Chinese in Southeast Asia?*** To do this, we will look at how aspects of cultural identity can be preserved, lost, or expanded upon when individuals situate themselves in foreign cultures. The opportunity for cultural hybridity to emerge is mainly due to rapid globalization, including the recent increase in migration of individuals, allowing for multiple Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia. Our primary methodology will include conducting interviews to learn about the personal stories of ethnically Chinese families, visiting historical sites to gain context and background, and engaging in ethnographic research to deeply examine cultural hybridity.

Anmei is a second generation Chinese immigrant, and Nicole is a fourth generation Chinese immigrant. Realizing that the histories of immigration in our families have caused us to develop mixed and sometimes ambiguous cultural identities, we wish to learn more about how people make choices, whether conscious or subconscious, that shape their identity. For example, growing up as a Chinese-American, Anmei has experienced a dichotomy between her Chinese family identity and her American social identity. Although her family worked hard to preserve its Chinese identity through speaking Mandarin and practicing Chinese cultural traditions, Anmei realizes that living in the United States has caused an additional American identity to emerge. In struggling to understand her full identity, she has wondered how personal experiences like family and larger contexts like society can shape or change one's perceptions of cultural identity.

On the other hand, Nicole's great grandfather moved to Singapore decades ago but her father decided to move back to China and then to Jakarta. Growing up in China for most of her life, when she moved to Jakarta she felt like she lost part of her Chinese identity, most apparent through her lost in skills in terms of speaking Chinese. On the contrary, her family adopted new traditions, which involved a mixture of Singaporean and Chinese customs, particularly during the Chinese New Years. It made her wonder why her father decided to reverse the migration pattern, and she became curious about the migration choices of others and its impact on their lives, and bigger questions emerged, such as *What parts of identities did migrants want to keep after spending a few generations abroad?* and *Do they feel like they lost anything?* and *Why did they choose to create new traditions?* Additionally, her father's migration choices led her to not only look at the historical trajectory of migration but also at how globalization influences people's choices of migrating, as economic opportunities continuously increase elsewhere in the world. Looking through the lens of our two immigration experiences allows us to paint a more complete picture about how one grapples with issues of identity.

'Cultural identity' is not merely about lifestyle, language, food and customs. It is also about how individuals interact with the values in the communities that they subscribe to, which may include the family and the ethnically-Chinese community. Our experiences and personal background, which include socioeconomic class, national origin, race and ethnicity, all influence how we perceive our cultural identity and what shapes it in the immediate community that we live in. Our family has some power over our cultural identity, as they make choices of where we live, the traditions we celebrate, our customs and lifestyle, and the ideas that permeate our lives. Despite that, we are all entitled to our own identities, which are highly dependent on our social context and personal experiences. Cultural identities are dynamic: in addition, it is not only our identities that may change but also the culture itself because of shifting social and political environments. Thus, during our investigation, we aim to consider culture and cultural identity as fluid entities that should be considered in the context of larger social factors.

We believe that exploring different notions of identity through this travel fellowship will cause a change in the self-perception of our own identities. Gaining greater clarity into our own cultural identities, we can be more intentional about our cultural practices and how we situate ourselves in our current cultures. In addition, understanding who we are now allows us to actively shape who we want to be in the future. We will be more conscious about how we want to situate ourselves in new cultures.

Location Rationale

We chose the location of Southeast Asia for our travel fellowship because it is a region with countries in close proximity that contain distinct identities. For example, the experiences of a Chinese-Vietnamese differ from that of a Chinese-Indonesian, which differ from that of a Chinese-Thai. Because of this diversity, we hypothesize that there will be greater range in how people conceptualize their identities. By comparing and contrasting the information we find among countries, we can explore the similarities and differences in how people choose to manage their identities. If there are differences, what are they and how have they influenced ethnically Chinese people's interactions with their national environments? Does this affect their everyday lives and cultural practices? In addition, we can capture the similarities and differences in how traveling and distinct experiences of migration in Southeast Asia have affected cultural identities.

In addition, Southeast Asia is logistically the best region to conduct our research because we can capture cultural diversity with a reasonable budget. We have personal contacts in Southeast Asian countries, so this will make it easier for us to find individuals to interview and allow us to have local points of emergency contact. However, we also aim to diversify our interviewees and capture the stories of Chinese immigrants from a range of socioeconomic statuses. To do this, we will visit locations with high densities of Chinese immigrants (i.e. Chinatown) and approach people we have not had prior contact with.

Nicole has historical context of Southeast Asia because she lived in Jakarta for a considerable amount of time; knowledge of the region's history will help us in making critical cultural connections since past social and political contexts can shape cultural identity. We aim to expand our historical knowledge by reading texts before our journey and visiting local history museums.

In the different Southeast Asian locations that we will travel to, some of the ways in which we plan to learn about the cultural experiences of the ethnically Chinese are: observing artistic responses and religious practices--which are signifiers for the beliefs that people subscribe to--inquiring about which holidays people celebrate and how, observing daily living habits, and investigating big and small interpretations of life. In addition, we plan to engage in meaningful conversations with the ethnically Chinese people we encounter in order to leave room for individuals to define their own cultural identities.

The four precise cities that we have chosen are: Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila, and Ho Chi Minh City. The reason for choosing the capital cities in the four countries is that there tends to be larger Chinese populations in bigger cities, as Chinese immigrants often chose to relocate to large economics hubs when they migrated to Southeast Asia.

The striking similarities and differences between Jakarta and Manila in terms of colonial oppression have intrigued us. The Dutch colonization of Jakarta and the Spanish colonization of Manila have proven that Chinese people have been historically oppressed and discriminated against in both locations. However, their lives after colonization and current experiences are distinct between Jakarta and Manila. Recently, former Jakarta governor Ahok was put in jail, partly because of his Chinese ethnicity, and the recent 1998 riot caused immense fear in Chinese-Indonesians. By conducting interviews, we will examine why ethnically Chinese people chose to stay in Jakarta even in the middle of political and ethnic tension between Chinese and Pribumi people. On the other hand, Chinese people in Manila have not recently experienced the same degree of discrimination, particularly with the Filipino government trying to amend ties with the Chinese government. Despite their differences, Chinese people in both Indonesia and the Philippines have never assimilated and integrated fully into their environments.

This is very different from Bangkok, as most Chinese-Thai seem to have integrated into Thailand society to a greater extent. The present royal family in Thai was founded by King Rama I, who was partly Chinese, and many Chinese-Thai the descendants of intermarriages between Chinese immigrants and the ethnically Thai. Nonetheless, this is not to say that ethnically Chinese people have not faced discrimination throughout Thailand's history: for example, the 1930-1950s military dictatorship under Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram and the 1970s Red Scare were time periods during which Chinese businesses faced unfair taxes and government controls and Chinese people were compelled to speak only Thai.

Another interesting destination is Ho Chi Minh City. While Vietnam's location proximity to China and existence as a former Chinese colony have led the Chinese to play a substantial role in

developing Vietnamese culture, Vietnam certainly has its own national identity and differs from China in cultural experiences. Because Vietnam has a history of attempted Chinese invasion, underlying tensions between Vietnam and China exist that could affect the attitudes of the ethnically Vietnamese towards Chinese immigrants or descendants of Chinese immigrants today. In addition, Chinese-Vietnamese have also faced social and political discrimination throughout Vietnam's history (i.e. the reign of the Communist party), with their socioeconomic statuses being a key source of discrimination.

Academic Rigor

This travel fellowship would provide us an opportunity to apply the ethnographic fieldwork methods, such as thick descriptions, that we learned in Anthropology class. Using an anthropological lens to approach observation would supplement the interviews we conduct and allow us to examine intricate details otherwise overlooked.

In addition, this travel fellowship proposal is a chance for us to expand on notions of family as a social institution, which we studied in Comparative Social Inquiry. By examining different immigrant families, we will further explore how family gives power to or takes power away from individuals. What does the family mean to an individual and how has it shaped an individual's national, ethnic, and personal identities?

Deliverables and Ripple Effect

We will film, with permission, the interviews we conduct with Chinese immigrants. We hope to style these interviews in an intimate and direct "screen test" format. After our return to Singapore, we will work together to edit the videos into a compelling compilation of immigrant stories that we will share with the Yale-NUS community. This compilation will either be a series of videos on a YouTube channel or a complete short film that we will host a screening for.

Since Yale-NUS has a diverse international student body, we hope to prompt our peers to reflect on how traveling has affected their own cultural identities through an interactive exhibition. In the fall semester, we will create a wall displaying our travel photographs with captions to start the conversation. A large portion of the wall will contain questions that ask students to then write or draw about their own personal and cultural relationships with transnational movement. We aim to display this exhibition starting from October 8, 2018 (the week after Recess Week) and plan to hold an exhibition opening during that week so that we can speak with students and faculty personally.