Processes of State, Class and Ethno-racial Formation in Urban Malaysia: Geo-Spatial Transformations and Regime Shifts 1970-2000

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Abstract: This article is a historico-ethnographic reconstruction of the simultaneously interconnected processes of postcolonial state, class and ethno-racial formation in Malaysia, as these were refracted in the daily lives of ethnic Chinese in one Malaysian city over a 30-year period (1970-2000). The projects of the dominant Malay ethno-racial fraction of the ruling elite to deflect class struggles, protect capital and consolidate its class interests through state expansion have become visible as aspects of space (Lebfebvre 1974) in the built environment of the city, as have the dialectical responses of resistance and emigration by the city's Chinese residents to these projects.

Keywords: urban spatial transformations, class formation, state formation, ethno-racial formation, Malaysia, crypto-geographies

Résumé : Cet article présente une reconstruction historico-ethnographique des processus inter-reliés de formation post-coloniale de l'État, des classes sociales et des différences ethno-raciales en Malaisie, tels qu'ils se sont manifestés dans la vie quotidienne des Malais d'origine chinoise dans une ville de la Malaisie pendant une période de 30 ans, soit de 1970 à 2000. Les projets de la fraction dominante ethno-raciale des Malais de la classe dirigeante visant à faire dévier les luttes de classe, à protéger leur capital et à consolider leurs intérêts en soutenant l'expansion de l'État, ont laissé des traces visibles dans l'espace (Lefebvre 1974) au sein de l'environnement construit de la ville. Les réactions dialectiques des résidents chinois de la ville à ces projets, qu'ils aient résisté ou immigré, ont également laissé des traces visibles dans l'espace.

Mots-clés: transformations spatiales urbaines, formation des classes sociales, formation de l'État, formation ethno-raciale, Malaisie, crypto-géographies

Introduction

In this article I argue that the processes of state formation in Malaysia, which over the three decades from the 1970s to the present have increased state enclosure of and control over the living and working spaces of the ethnic Chinese minority, are also processes of class and ethno-racial formation.[1] I attempt to illustrate this claim by a process of analytical abstraction in which I employ an ethnographic study of urban space among Chinese Malaysians in one Malaysian city to index broader national changes in the political-cultural economy of class and ethno-racial relations within the processes of state-making. To do this, I am particularly interested in drawing on Lefebvre's (1974) analytics of space in everyday life in which he analyzes three distinctive aspects or moments whose interplay must be understood—"spatial practices," "representations of space," and "representational space"—in class and state formation.

For Lefebvre, spatial practices are the embodied habitus and routines persons engage in as they move through and appropriate space. Representations of space are conceptions of spaces within systems of verbal and visual signs, such as maps, as for example created by "scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers, and social engineers." Representational space is space as affectively marked in perceptions, memories, and cathexes (Lefebvre 1974:38-42). All three aspects are dimensions of how people talk about and appropriate spaces in their everyday lives as they come into relation with the means of production, form ethno-racial identities and engage as subjects and citizens with the states that rule them. A historical ethnography of urban spaces, of how in the past and present people have talked about and acted toward spaces as they mobilize forms of material power, can provide a particularly insightful understanding of how cities manifest the dialectically connected formations of classes, ethno-racial groups and states over time.

I begin with several related theoretical and epistemological premises relevant to an interpretative political economy of classes, ethno-racial groups and states in postcolonial capitalist societies such as Malaysia. First, I follow E.P. Thompson (1978) in seeking to reconstruct how classes come into existence through class struggle, but never exist as "objective" positions in society outside of the history of struggle. Second, in many postcolonial nation-states, members of dominant classes by virtue of their control of the state seek to define class struggles out of existence by promoting the lived identities of people as members of ethno-racial groups, that is, groups defined with respect to one another (and antagonistically) as in essence different and unequal (Williams 1989; Alonso 1994; Harrison 1995) in ways that cross-cut or neutralize class-based identities, solidarities and alliances.[2] At the same time, the ethno-racial fractions of the dominant class generally display a solid intra-class alliance ruling on behalf of their shared class interest in capital accumulation, which only breaks down in times of generalized social crisis. State elites from the dominant class employ law, state policies, programs, ideologies and projects to create distinctions that divide and rank the working population into mutually antagonistic social groups. As Sider (2003, 2006) points out, governing class elites promote such divisions between different groups in terms of groups' differential rights of citizenship related to livelihood and the labour process as a means of limiting the demands of labour and controlling labour markets. As a consequence, these distinctions functionally disenfranchise certain working populations, even to the point where their social (and cultural) reproduction are jeopardized, while the structurally imposed impetus toward dialectical struggle between classes is deflected into ethnic and national conflicts. This does not mean that class struggles disappear or that classes are not formed from struggle, but that these struggles are misrecognized and limited in their transformative effects.

One major ideological consequence of such a specific configuration is that people tend to articulate their suffering from class-based inequalities and exploitation as grievances and antipathies between ethno-racial groups, since state institutions and practices impose hegemonic "truths" about ethno-racial differences onto the everyday lived experiences of members of these groups, even as such truths are episodically disrupted by misrecognized class struggles. One major social consequence is that in contrast to the general unity found between different ethno-racial fractions of the ruling dominant class, members of subordinate classes tend to form self-conscious solidarities and discourses only when they belong to the same ethno-racial group. Malaysia is certainly one such state manifesting this pattern.

The theoretical and epistemological challenge of my fieldwork among urban Chinese Malaysians has therefore been to begin with the experiences of my informants, most frequently articulated in terms of their disadvantaged ethno-racial status in Malaysian society, but not to end the investigation with a merely superficial interpretation of their experiences. Such premature closure would have prevented an analysis of the processes of class conflict and state formation which broadly encompass these experiences and account for why they were channelled along ethno-racial lines to begin with. Experience never suffices or is exhaustive; analysis and theory are crucial to make sense of it, and in this case an analytics of urban space provides critical entry to these processes.

My aim in the historical ethnography that follows is therefore to situate the uses of urban space in Malaysia within these connected processes of class struggle, ethno-racial division, and state formation—processes rife with ambiguity and conflicts over the meanings of citizenship, the nation, and group and individual rights to the social product. I pose the question: how do changing urban spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces index transformations occurring over the last 30 years as elements of these three interconnected processes? To investigate urban space in this way, I seek to frame my ethnographic findings on changes among urban Chinese Malaysians since the 1970s within a historical political-economic analysis of the displacement of class struggle and state formation into the terms of ethno-racial conflict, spatially manifested.[3]

State Ordering of Ethno-racial Spaces

The "Emergency," the counterinsurgency campaign conducted by British colonial rulers from 1948-60 against the insurrection of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), made it increasingly difficult, by the time of Malaysia's independence in 1957, for Malaysians to publicly think and hence act in terms of "class" and "class struggle." Proletarian class ideologies in support of restive postwar labour unions enunciated by Chinese labourers and displaced squatters were put under public proscription, as the MCP came under state repression in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Cross-racial solidarities between workers and farmers were broken when the leftist Malay Nationalist Party and the All-Malayan Council of Joint Action-PUTERA, a pan-ethnic alliance of parties to which it belonged, were banned, and the leaders of both arrested and detained in the early 1950s. British rulers also sought to drive a spatio-social wedge between rural Chinese

squatters (displaced by the Japanese occupation 1941-45) and rural Malay farmers by forcibly urbanizing 500,000 Chinese and resettling them into fortified "New Villages" (Sandhu 1964), identifying them to conservative Malay leaders and poor rural Malays as suspect "subversives" who were enemies of and aliens in Malaya.

By the 1960s, it was no longer safe to speak publicly of class struggle, or even of the working class, as persecution of the Labour Party and the suspension of local council elections in the 1960s show (Tennant 1973). Late colonial administrators had successfully prepared conservative Malays—members of royalty, petty civil servants and large landowners—as their successors after Independence, and these latter, interconnected by marriage and clientage, became the governing elite as leaders of the dominant party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). They formed a coalition, known as "The Alliance," with the anti-Communist Chinese bourgeoisie, represented by the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), and together with it formed the postcolonial dominant class (Nonini 1992:103-126). Within the Alliance, the division of labour allotted political leadership to the Malay elite, and economic decision-making to Chinese businessmen. Once talk and political action along the lines of class had been suppressed, a hegemonic discourse of essential difference and social division between Chinese, Malay and Indian "races" emerged and became institutionalized through the powers of the postcolonial state. The state circulated and firmed up claims of naturalized differences and inequalities between Malays (Muslim, poor, rural, honest yeomen, taken advantage of by unscrupulous outsiders) and Chinese (polytheistic, wealthy, urban, crafty merchants, in control of the economy), and these became public truths or myths.[4]

By the late 1960s, as part of state projects of ethno-racial recognition that diverted social tensions from class, government officials had come to identify ethno-racial groups with explicit spatial referents. The distinction between "rural" and "urban" became an official metaphor representing the manifold political, cultural, et cetera, differences between Malays or *Bumiputera* (literally "princes of the soil")—the "rural" populations—and Chinese and Indians—the "urban" populations.[5] Thus, for example, the reports of successive Malaysia Plans in the 1960s and 1970s identified the most serious priorities for "development"—particularly the need for preferential provision of infrastructure such as schools, paved roads, and health clinics—with the "rural population," that is, with Malays (Government of Malaysia 1979). This spatial image pointed to the threatening presence of politically unsympathetic "urban" working-class populations and

the spaces they occupied. Their presence became a matter of concern to the ruling Malay elite and its Chinese bourgeois allies.

In this sense, the state of Penang was the most "urban," that is, the most "Chinese" of all states in Peninsular Malaysia—with about 50% of its population being listed in recent censuses as ethnic Chinese, compared to the percentage of Chinese nationally at about 35%. By the early 1970s, the Chinese population of the city of Bukit Mertajam, where I began fieldwork in 1978, made up almost one half of the total population of the district (49%), with the remainder being Malays (39%) and Indians (12%). But there was an even closer association between ethno-racial identity and place, since almost 80% of the population residing within the boundaries of Bukit Mertajam, the district capital and its only large town, were ethnic Chinese (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 1972).

The New Economic Policy: Ethno-racial Complaints, Class Injuries and New Bases of Accumulation and State Formation

The national elections of 1969 were followed by the 13 May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur during which hundreds of Chinese were killed at the hands of petit-bourgeois and poor Malays fearing the new enfranchisement of urban Chinese voters who had successfully elected opposition candidates in several states. A crisis of legitimation faced the Alliance of UMNO and the MCA and challenged the pre-existing balance of power between the ethno-racial elites of the dominant class—with Malay leaders in charge of politics, and Chinese businessmen of the economy. After a year of effective martial law and the suppression of political dissent, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was instituted by the UMNO-dominated parliament in 1970 in response to widespread Malay discontent against the Chinese presence. There were two stated objectives to the NEP—to eradicate poverty and to reduce the identification of each "race" with economic function; that is to move Malays into business and the professions, which had previously been populated mostly by Chinese and expatriates from the colonial period (Government of Malaysia 1979:27-58). While the first objective of the NEP sought to placate impoverished Malay farmers and urban poor, the second provided the rationale for the aggrandizement of the Malay fraction of the ruling coalition—UMNO leaders, Malay royalty, and large landowners—and those who belonged to the growing UMNO patronage networks in each state. This decisive step put politics in command, and while assuring the protection of capital accumulation in general and the class domination it required, dislodged the wealthy Chinese bourgeoisie from its prior position

of economic dominance and imposed a legal and administrative apparatus of control that generated state discrimination against and intensified conditions of exploitation of Chinese workers, family-operated businesses, small capitalists and professionals.

Not long after my arrival in Bukit Mertajam in late 1978, I became accustomed to hearing what I, at first, took to be a standard litany of complaints from Chinese residents about state policies, enumerated to me on repeated occasions. The list of injustices told me was long and came from people diversely situated in the local economy. The Malaysian government discriminated against Chinese because it required their children to pass Bahasa Malaysia (standardized Malay) instead of English or Mandarin examinations in the Form 5 secondary school year that determined whether they would go on to university. It set quotas for the number of Chinese who could enter the universities, while it forbade Chinese from undertaking to fund and establish a private Chinese-language university, Merdeka University. Government officials, all Malays, were "corrupt" and always hungry for bribes. The government took away hard-earned equity from Chinese business owners without compensation. Government employment virtually excluded Chinese from the civil service, police and military (and people stated that the government, after all, was the country's largest employer). The government's Ministry of Public Works discriminated against Chinese businesses in handing out large government contracts. Special Branch police threatened opposition leaders with preventive detention (and detained some) when they spoke out against Malay *tequan* (special rights) and so on. Informants made these complaints to me informally as they expected that I would listen sympathetically, since my ability to speak and read Chinese indicated that I honoured "Chinese culture." They said they dared not utter such words in public for fear they might come to the attention of the Special Branch. What I want to emphasize is that while this catalogue of injustices confirmed to Bukit Mertajam residents that they were being treated "unfairly" as "second-class citizens" by "their [Malays'] government," at the same time, informants emphasized to me that as citizens who belonged to the Chinese "race," they recognized the legitimacy of the independent Malaysian state, saw their home in Malaysia where many had lived for generations, and knew little about China, most having never visited there.

As I began to listen to these complaints—and all informants displayed some animosity toward the government and Malays and a sense of being unjustly treated—it became clear that people's precise complaints were dependant on their class positions. Merchants told

me they particularly despised the Industrial Coordination Act (1975) which allowed the equity of medium- and large-sized Chinese-owned firms to be taken over by government-controlled corporations to be held "in trust" for poor Malays. Merchants who were wealthy enough to have visible property but who lacked access to UMNO or MCA patronage networks were those most subject to such takeovers. In contrast, young Chinese adults educated in Mandarin or English and coming from the families of workers, artisans and professionals and from self-employed business families, were most anxious or angry about the new examination in Bahasa Malaysia required for university entry and the new university entry quotas instituted for Chinese. Many I talked to felt that both were deliberate and mean-spirited attempts to provincialize Chinese by preventing them from acquiring linguistic skills needed in commerce or the professions: "One can do business or study in English or Chinese anywhere in the world but one can only use Bahasa in Malaysia and Indonesia, nowhere else." But then, as I discovered, business families owning extensive capital were at that time starting to pay to send their grown children abroad to universities in Australia, Singapore, Canada, the U.S. and Taiwan, and these complaints about discrimination in education were of little direct concern. And different again, working-class Chinese came under intensified harassment by police and military who saw them as anti-social, lawless and subversive; police shakedowns and road blocks for "tea money" targetted this group for rough treatment, as I discovered in my 1985 research on the work of Chinese truck drivers in Malaysia (Nonini 1999). They well knew that they had little chance for government employment or work in government-owned corporations where Malay special rights prevailed. They did not mention worries about government or Malay takeover of Chinese business equity.

From a historical and national perspective, it is possible to tie this array of class injuries to a set of complexly interconnected processes of class, ethno-racial and state formation. What NEP policies that ostensibly aimed to reduce overall ethnic economic disparities actually focused on was the goal of making rich not all Malays but the families of UMNO leaders and those business groups, royalty and rentiers who were their clients, as UMNO maintained its dominance over elections and the government from Independence onward (Gomez and Jomo 1997). This meant massive state interventions not only in what had been the dominant plantation and mining sectors of the colonial period, but also in the most modern corporate sectors in ways that systematically favoured those groups who made up the "new Malays," the *Melayu bharu*—a

state-connected economic upper class-in-becoming. The conceptual link between the Malays forming this class and *all* Malays made in official NEP rhetoric was the notion of "trusteeship." These Malays were to manage public enterprises controlled by UMNO as "trustees" for poor rural Malays, who would eventually come to prosper as soon as (at some indefinite future time) they were able to acquire wealth held for them by the trustees.

The instrument for state intervention was the public enterprise managed by Malays connected to the UMNO elite by family, marriage, and region and, most markedly, political clientage. Under NEP legislation and policies, UMNO leaders serving as government ministers converted government departments into new profit-seeking government-owned public enterprises and directed the managers of these new enterprises to form joint-venture partnerships with foreign industrial investors and to acquire equity from domestic capitalists. Large Chinese-owned banks, factories, real estate firms, plantation and mining companies as well as many smaller businesses were required to turn over up to 40% of their equity as the condition for being allowed to continue operating (Gomez and Jomo 1997).

By the late 1970s, this "statification" of the economy aimed in part at claiming the equity of private Chinese capital for redistribution to public enterprises and the UMNO patronage machine was well underway, as were specific NEP measures that sought to eliminate what UMNO leaders and their followers regarded as advantages Chinese possessed vis-à-vis Malays (e.g., the prevalence of English and Chinese as languages in the workplace, and higher Chinese exam scores ensuring greater access to universities). In support of official NEP policies, UMNO's Malay base of supporters (farmers, small tradespeople, soldiers, police, teachers and petty government functionaries) held shared notions that Chinese were essentially alien, subversive, dishonest, greedy and anti-social and it is undeniable that an ethnic revanchism by those then in power targetted Chinese. My informants saw these policies of "their government" as vindictive, punitive and capricious.

NEP policies by no means harmed the class interests of all Chinese in Bukit Mertajam. The new export-oriented industrialization policies of the NEP, which promoted major foreign investments in nearby Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in Penang state, in fact, provided many opportunities for enhanced capital accumulation among owners of local industrial subcontractors and small factories. These factories produced apparel and small consumer goods assembled by young women (themselves mostly Chinese) working under sweatshop conditions in illicit factories in the city's residential neighbourhoods. Construction contractors, labour recruiters, bus company owners and others providing ancillary services to the large factories in the EPZs also found chances for private enrichment. In contrast, government police and officials continued their violent repression of "subversive" Chinese workers, while quashing the prospects for both upward mobility by workers and for social reproduction by Chinese artisans, professionals and those self-employed in small businesses, by denying these subordinate classes access to university education, capital and government employment.

Everyday State Predation, Class Repression and Encompassing Ethno-racial Spaces

It is no surprise, therefore, in areas where a majority of Chinese resided, as in Bukit Mertajam, that a large majority voted in the 1978 national election for the candidates of opposition political parties and against the ruling coalition of political parties dominated by UMNO. In Bukit Mertajam, this party was the Democratic Action Party (DAP) led by Mandarin-educated Chinese leaders. The "stronghold" of the DAP from the late 1960s through the 1970s were several thousand Chinese living in *kampong* (villages) within the boundaries of the city and others residing in three outlying New Villages still in existence from the Emergency era. These kampongs were several densely populated squatter areas occupied by poorer Chinese. Residents paid the landowners nominal rents, but later—when downtown real estate values surged—resisted forcible removal, and insisted on remaining on as a customary right. Most kampong and New Village residents were workers, artisans and petty traders, although over time a few began to prosper by setting up small-scale manufacturing in their homes (e.g., putting-out work in apparel) or operating small enterprises (e.g., bus owner-drivers) servicing nearby EPZs while remaining in low-rent kampong homes. Many poor residents belonged to "secret societies," and engaged in illegal activities such as selling lottery tickets not sanctioned by the government, running small gambling dens, shaking down local merchants, distilling *samsu* (liquor) and, in a very few cases, smuggling and refining heroin.

At the time I began my fieldwork in 1978, government officials, most of them Malays, viewed Bukit Mertajam kampong dwellers and New Village residents not only as ungratefully voting for the opposition party but also as dangerous, subversive and criminal. Here is how one Road Transport official, described them in 1980:

Over there in Bukit Mertajam they do a lot of evil things: smuggling goods in from Thailand; opening factories making imitation goods; breaking the traffic laws by having unregistered trailers in their yards or by not having paid road tax. You see, they are all grouped together, concentrated together in a very small area, some 20-25 000 of them. Therefore, they let one another do all sorts of illegal things without reporting them to the government. There are also communists over there. They [Chinese] will do anything to make money…[They are] doing anything they like, with nobody to stop them.

During this period, the postcolonial links between state formation, ethno-racial politics, and class formation were firmly consolidated. From the perspective of Bukit Mertajam's Chinese, state rule and "race" domination were linked in a variety of ways. In everyday life these most commonly made their appearance as predation by state officials, police and military on Chinese residents. Whether it was the "tea money" (bribes) required from Chinese truck drivers to pass through a roadblock or from petty merchants to have electricity installed in their factories, or the monthly collections by police officers visiting each Chinese-owned shophouse downtown, or the giving by wealthy entrepreneurs of large sums of money in "red packets" to friendly District Office officials and police superintendents on Chinese New Year and other holidays, all Chinese paid (Nonini 2005). There is no doubt that in the aggregate, the combined flows of exactions like these from urban Chinese settlements throughout Malaysia represented an enormous flow of capital toward those who worked at various levels for national, state, and district-level government agencies, who largely coincided with UMNO patron-client networks. It is difficult to see this as anything other than the consolidation of the capital accumulation base of members of a state-connected Malay official rentier class.

At the same time, however, these costs were class-based, and thus unevenly shared and suffered. While for a well-to-do businessman giving red packets was merely one of the costs of doing business and might be part of a strategy of currying favour in order to illicitly receive government contracts, for a poor worker or a self-employed petty property owner (e.g., a truck owner-driver) coming into frequent contact with police or petty officials and thus forced to pay them tea money taken out of low wages or petty profits, these impositions were major losses.

Withdrawal of national and state level government services were also employed as a whip to enforce political discipline on a recalcitrant and dissatisfied Chinese population of labourers, the self-employed, artisans and oth-

ers who did not accumulate capital. This took the form of national and state government officials systematically penalizing the poor residents of the city's kampongs and New Villages who voted for the opposition by denying them post-electoral municipal services. Such services were provided to more politically loyal, wealthier Chinese constituencies residing in outlying areas like the new suburbs where many Chinese owners of capital had moved and to the rural Malay-populated villages of the rest of the district. Here is how an informant who lived in one of the city kampongs described its situation to me in 1978:

> There are shortages in water and electricity that we residents experience there. Many residents, like my family, draw on wells for our water supply. This water and electricity shortage is due to the area I live in–Kampong Tanah Liat, which is like other kampongs in Bukit Mertajam. Unlike areas out of town where the wealthy live, electrical, water and road services are poor in these areas…Officials have never come to visit my neighbourhood to inspect conditions there. This is due to two factors: our State Assemblyman is the DAP's man, and also our area is populated exclusively by Chinese.

Throughout the 1970s, the government extended a reign of police terror throughout these urban kampong settlements, ostensibly against the secret societies whom officials and police saw as the core criminal element there. Here is how the owner of a small restaurant located on the fringes of one of the town's kampongs described the actions of a particular police inspector who made continual incursions into these urban kampongs:

> Inspector Tan has done a lot of good by threatening bad hats [criminals] with arrest and administrative detention on Pulau Jerejak. For instance, one bad hat named Henry is notorious on this street for his threatening behaviour. He carries *parangs* (knives) and things like that. One time, I was disturbed by Henry and his gang who awakened me late at night and threatened me, and had his gang stand on my car. After a while, however, I saw no more of Henry. I found out later that Inspector Tan had sent him to Pulau Jerejak for at least a year. Inspector Tan can do this with the authorization of the magistrate, and no trial is needed.

The class character of state repression directed against the unruly youth of the kampongs associated with the Chinese urban working class was evident, as indeed was the broader intimidation of poorer Chinese, irrespective of their ties to secret societies, living in these areas.

Police raids and harassment, violence and imprisonment of kampong residents were one means of establish-

ing a state presence in and police controls over these spaces of opposition defined by subordinate class and ethno-racial position. By the 1980s, the government deployed an even more effective weapon against these spatially defined enemies of the developmental state: "improvement." This was intimated in a press release of 1979 by the local branch of the Gerakan Party, whose state president was also the Chief Minister of Penang and a strong ally of top UMNO leaders. It appeared in a regional Chinese-language newspaper under the innocuous-sounding title "Bukit Mertajam Gerakan proposes improved traffic measures":

> roads can be broadened, for example, Jalan Aston can be widened and afterward converted into a two-way street; a new road can be opened to connect Tanah Liat intersection with a new Kampong Cross Street. When this road is finished, it will reduce the traffic on Jalan Tanah Liat. Vehicles coming and going between Kedah and Butterworth can use this new road, and at Kampong Wusha, another road should be opened up to connect Berapit and Kulim Road. This proposed road will directly reduce the town's traffic. [Guanghua Ribao 1979]

These proposals for traffic "improvement"—which required extensive removal of hundreds of squatters living in several kampongs who happened to lay in the way of the proposed roads—were put into effect in the late 1980s.

Residents viewed such rhetoric as a prelude to grander measures of state and Malay encompassment of Chinese space. For example, in 1979 after I noticed that an open area of ground abutting the town's *padang* (municipal square) was being used on a daily basis by vegetable dealers as a depot for sorting vegetables brought in from outside, I asked a vegetable wholesaler about it. He replied, "we won't be here much longer, because the Malays are going to move us out in order to construct an Islamic courthouse for themselves." When I returned several years later, the Shariah courthouse—symbol of the nexus between the state, Malays, and Islam—had been constructed in this prominent central space.

The Crypto-Geography of "Travelling the Dark Road": Representational Spaces Which Represent What Cannot Be Spoken Of

Wittgenstein (1961) wrote that "that which we cannot speak of, we must pass over in silence," but in daily life, as distinct from philosophy, silence can be eloquent. Here I want to suggest that even as state encompassment of

Chinese spaces in Bukit Mertajam proceeded in the name of the NEP, a new anti-statist sensibility among Chinese emerged to thwart the claims of the state, but without announcing its name. It was radically different from the standard litany of complaints about the Malaysian government's discriminatory policies described above. At the level of discreet speech, the latter was a discourse about "unfairness" in how Chinese citizens were treated by the governing Malay majority, measured by a notion of citizen "rights" which the government ignored. Working within the frame set by the state's recognition of group rights, one might take this discourse to be a very model of discursive encompassment of citizens' subjectivities: Chinese were "second class citizens," but still citizens.

However, if this was encompassment, for many Chinese it was only superficially so. I wish to argue that in strong contrast to it were rumours about residents who "travelled the dark road," (*zoule heian de luxian*). A metaphor of mobility interesting in its own right, *travelling the dark road* referred to persons who sought to gain wealth through illegal and admittedly anti-social means, especially narcotics trafficking and processing. Narcotics trafficking, people told me, shadowed the transnational connections that businessmen in the Bukit Mertajam truck transport and fish wholesaling industries had established with merchants trading out of the fisheries of southern Thailand. Both groups shared China native-place and linguistic affinities as Teochews, and in some cases had actual kinship ties. People thus speculated about the smuggling of narcotics from the Golden Triangle through southern Thailand based on these connections, and the opportunities for trafficking (e.g., by employees) they provided.

Travelling the dark road constituted a circulating message based on improvised signs which set apart specific features of the everyday landscapes of Bukit Mertajam with the stamp of an anti-statist imaginary of capital accumulation. These rumours did not dispute outright so much as displace the moral narrative of the New Economic Policy, which was that Malay economic betterment would develop the whole nation, even if some (i.e., Chinese) had to suffer for the nation's good. At the same time, travelling the dark road, something never declared yet continually alluded to in these rumours, also undermined the conventional trope of Chinese rags-to-riches-and-fame featured in the standard biographies of successful businessmen[6]: "raising up one's family with one's own bare hands" through hard work, thrift and intelligence and, once having made one's fortune "taking from society then to use for society" through philanthropy that benefitted "Chinese society" while it celebrated a man's reputation for generosity.

A range of features of the built environment and more broadly of the humanly-transformed spaces in Bukit Mertajam coded this alternative moral economy of travelling the dark road. This moral economy never announced itself as such in public. Instead, stories and rumours circulated around and invested certain places and spaces—shopfronts, bank offices, plots of land, truck depots, even the mountain behind the town itself—with passing and improvised meanings that pointed to a dangerous path to capital accumulation. Conversely, local spaces and places were mnemonic placeholders for the stories and rumours that carried the marks of this alternative economy.

One such representational space (Lefebvre 1974) that pointed residents to the possibility that someone living or doing business in them was travelling the dark road, were certain two- or three-storey shophouses in the downtown district or in outlying commercial ribbons along the roads leading into Bukit Mertajam, when evaluated in the context of local knowledge and rumours about sudden changes in the financial condition of their owners. Mr. Ng of Heng Ee Agricultural Supply, had this to say:

> People are suspicious of me because I have such a small downtown office on Jalan, yet I am able to do such a large business. When I first met Mr. Ooi See-Huat, the Assistant Manager of the OCBC Bank in town, he was very suspicious of me because he knew that my monthly turnover was very high. How could I do this from such a small office? I said that it was due to the convenience of transport in Bukit Mertajam. I can take orders at my shop, and then have the fertilizers and their components transported to and from my godown elsewhere a few miles outside of downtown, in Alma. Yet some people have been suspicious of me because of the smallness of my office, and have assumed that I am smuggling drugs instead.

As his wife Mrs. Ng put it to me on another occasion, "many Chinese businessmen hang out a sign in front of their shops, but do a different kind of business inside, as in the case of heroin manufacturers—they become rich and no one knows it."

Another representational space associated with travelling the dark road were plots of land that someone acquired when their legitimate source of income to purchase expensive land in and near the town was not in evidence. One evening in late January 1980, as Mr. Chooi was driving me out of town and we passed by a cemetery, I saw that an area near it had been planted in oil palms.

> Author: Who has planted oil palms on such valuable land which is road frontage and immediately adjacent to the cemetery?

> Chooi: Eng Huat Company owns this land. The idea is to plant oil palms and hold onto the land until it can be developed into housing estates and sold at a high profit. People expect that eventually Bukit Mertajam's housing development will even extend as far as out here. This company is also involved in drug trafficking. Recently the son of its owner has been seized by police for drug trafficking. He's only been released after paying a very large bribe of several hundred thousand ringgit to certain people. After he was released, he fled to Taiwan and lives there now. Many of Bukit Mertajam's very wealthy people are involved in drug trafficking and in other illegal ways of making money, like smuggling and manufacturing liquor. But some people trafficking in drugs are not yet wealthy, and both workers and bosses are involved.

Residents of the city might be said to be divided over this alternative moral economy, if it were even possible to assess the presence of diverse opinion on the morality of such activities as heroin manufacture, sales, or smuggling, in a situation when the articulation of opinion itself required the existence of a field of public debate. Such did not exist and one could not do an opinion survey. The state promoted its anti-narcotics propaganda vigorously and unopposed in schools and throughout the electronic and paper media. Government officials spoke of narcotics trafficking as the gravest injury to the Malaysian, and especially Malay, nation in a tone that brooked no discussion of alternative views. Narcotics manufacturing and trafficking were hanging offenses, and local Chinese had been convicted and hung for engaging in them. Still, the Malaysian government showed no racial favouritism, having hung Malays, Chinese and Europeans with an equal rope—although class favouritism existed, as the example of the rich man's son's successful flight to Taiwan shows.

Thus, no one I spoke to in Bukit Mertajam publicly promoted the idea that narcotics manufacture, smuggling and trafficking were acceptable practices. Nonetheless, these stories and rumours attached to places suggested that while some disapproved outright, others were ambivalent. Some people displayed a waggish black humour in mentioning Bukit Mertajam's international notoriety as a centre for heroin smuggling in north Malaysia, transparently extolling the town's reputation as a matter of local pride. Others, if pushed, said they deplored these practices but spoke of those who committed them and got away with doing so in terms of moral neutrality or even of backhanded admiration. When I asked Mr. Chooi what residents thought of persons who travelled the dark road, he replied, "To them, it is just a matter of making money, and if people are able to get

away with drug trafficking and so become rich, it is acceptable to them. But I myself feel this traffic definitely hurts people, and perhaps such men will find out that in the future they have harmed their own children." Rumours circulated that several of the town's wealthiest "celebrities," noted for their philanthropy to local Chinese institutions (e.g., the Independent High School) and for holding high office in community associations, had begun their journey toward successful capital accumulation by travelling precisely along this "road." After all, even if one "took from society" in this way, as long as such a man's money was also "used for society," this was what ultimately mattered.

Far from being discursively encompassed by the rhetoric of citizenship promoted by the Malaysian state, those residents who enunciated the crypto-geography of travelling the dark road cultivated an anti-state imaginary that placed them potentially outside and beyond the moral community of the Malaysian nation. This imaginary challenged the conventional rags-to-riches-and-fame account of Chinese achievement: there were other ways to become rich and well-regarded, as dangerous and anti-social as they were. This new imaginary points not to the dangerous "voice" option some residents took in publicly opposing the state, as in the case of those who participated in opposition party politics of the DAP, even less to the "loyalty" option adopted by some residents who joined and were active in parties allied with UMNO like the Gerakan Party and Malaysian Chinese Association—but to the option of "exit" from the Malaysian nation-state itself (Hirschman 1970). Although some residents were discursively encompassed by the two options of citizens—loyalty and voice—others repudiated this encompassment entirely by the imaginary of exit. What I am suggesting here is that this imaginary preceded and made possible the physical move offshore by many Chinese in the years that followed.

Exiting Malaysian Space or Being Stuck, and What "Chinese Society"?

During 1978-80 and again during my visits in the 1980s and early 1990s, middle-aged businessmen in Bukit Mertajam often approached me asking how to migrate to the U.S., Canada and elsewhere, or sounded me out about assisting their grown children's entry into universities overseas. Many talked longingly of moving their families to countries like Australia, Taiwan or Canada which they had visited as tourists. For instance, in 1990, when I asked a local leader how I might best reciprocate the many Bukit Mertajam residents who had helped me in my previous research, he informed me that the best way of showing

thanks would be to talk to local high school students about the process of applying to overseas universities and so I gave a presentation at the local Chinese Independent High School on how to apply to American universities.

As I have described elsewhere (Nonini 1997), relocation overseas by Chinese Malaysians who belonged to small business or professional families took the form of a "middling transnationalism" which most frequently began when an adult son or daughter applied to and successfully entered a university overseas in Australia, the U.S., Canada, New Zealand or, in the case of Chinese-only speakers, Taiwan. Such transnational migration whose objective was over time to permanently relocate family members and their (usually modest) liquid capital overseas, was in stark contrast to the "globalization" of Chinese Malaysian tycoons who sent out capital (and sometimes family members) as part of a capital accumulation strategy of seeking new markets, while putting their wealth beyond the grasp of the Malaysian state. During my fieldwork in 1985 and then again from 1990-93, my attempts to find people whom I had last seen a few years previously in their homes in Bukit Mertajam and hoped to interview again were stymied because I could not locate them. But then I would encounter a mutual acquaintance who told me, "oh, Tan went to Australia to live with his sons who work there," or "the Cheah family moved to New Zealand."

It is a fair generalization from such encounters and other evidence (Munro-Kua 1996:166, Table A.6) that during these years many Chinese families in Malaysia, like these small-scale capitalists and professionals from Bukit Mertajam, sought opportunities to move overseas during the same period that neoliberal Anglophone states throughout the Asia Pacific were liberalizing their immigration programs to seek out "business migrants" and "skill migrants" who could bring scarce "global" capital and high-tech skills into their territories for investment (Nonini 2004). Huge amounts of Chinese capital fled Malaysia to overseas locations; according to a Morgan Guaranty estimate, US$12 billion was sent overseas from Malaysia from 1976-85 (Gomez and Jomo 1997:44). While the families of wealthy tycoons accounted for most of this capital flight, nonetheless in terms of the number of people involved, the offshoring of capital and people by middling transnationalists had a far greater social effect on the Chinese who remained.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that only the owners of capital could consider permanently relocating overseas. It is crucial to mark at this point a new inflection in class formation—with the colonial days of upward mobility for Chinese migrants long since past, with the NEP-

based discriminations in university entry and government and corporate employment against Chinese labourers, self-employed and others—the exit option for Chinese labourers, male and female, was also one that could only be temporary. Within the tiered transnational labour markets that had emerged in the Asia Pacific during the 1980s, working-class Chinese could only find jobs as day labourers in Japan and Taiwan doing "3-D" jobs (dirty, dangerous and difficult) or as domestic workers, where wages were high compared to those in Malaysia but permanent work and residence were unattainable.

Outside of temporary and illegal "overstaying" as overseas labour migrants in these countries, Chinese workers had no exit from Malaysia, unlike better-off Chinese. Even the option of migrant labour in Japan ended when the onset of depression in the Japanese economy in the early 1990s led to crackdowns on Malaysian workers who overstayed their visas. Workers found themselves in the condition of being "stuck" defending their increasingly embattled spaces of work and life within Malaysia (Nonini 1997). In contrast to the late 1940s, they were without labour union representation or political power, and had recourse only to jobs within the Chinese petty capitalist sector and (for women) the booming corporate industrial export sector. Extensive control by public enterprises of major sectors of the economy meant that large corporations effectively enforced NEP policies of employment and language discrimination that most adversely affected Chinese workers, and kept working class Chinese from employment, access to credit, et cetera. Chinese workers, both men and women, were effectively "docilized" as objects of capitalist exploitation from the 1980s onward. Although this process of subjection became increasingly endurable in material terms for working people—due to booming conditions of rapid economic growth associated with Malaysia's export-based industrialization with generally rising wages, high employment and rising living standards—nonetheless, Chinese working women and men were employed on terms firmly set by Chinese petty capital and supported by the state. The sites at which petty capital sought to exploit these workers were those in which class struggle, occluded and denied, took place (Nonini 1999).

1990s-2000s: Elite Withdrawal, State and Ethno-racial Spaces of Enclosure and New Divisions in the Working Class

By the mid-1980s, the government-owned public enterprises that dominated the most dynamic sectors of the economy had suffered major losses not only due to declines in export markets for Malaysian oil and other commodities, but also due to their poor and inefficient management. Approaches to business taken by these public enterprises were driven far more by their managers' interests in cultivating their UMNO patronage ties, and for some managers by their own self-aggrandizement than by careful considerations of profitability (Gomez and Jomo 1997). As a result, by 1987 the debt held by public enterprises (among those whose books could be audited) amounted to more than 30% of all government debt servicing (Gomez and Jomo 1997:78).

As a result of this financial crisis and of pressures toward liberalization coming from the World Bank and the U.S. Treasury, the Mahathir administration embarked on a campaign to privatize public enterprises, first transforming their legal organization into public and private limited companies, and then selling their assets to preselected or favoured bidders. Privatization occurred through sale of assets and equity, leasing out of assets, management contracts, and in the case of new projects, through "build-operate-transfer."[7] Although privatization was a radical measure that reduced the size of the public sector and public enterprises as instruments for the NEP, UMNO leaders chose to sell the newly privatized corporations to their clients—the managers, equity owners, and Malay-equity trustees of public enterprises. The process of managing the economy through political patronage via the state-corporate nexus continued in altered legal form. There is evidence that publicly-owned assets were divested at prices far below their market value to Bumiputera managers with political connections to UMNO (Gomez and Jomo 1997:81-83). Through this process, New Malays condensed into a specific upper-class position—separated by vast differences in wealth, power and social status not only from other Malays, but from Chinese and Indians as well. They, their UMNO patrons and a very few extremely wealthy Chinese tycoons with strong patronage ties to top UMNO leaders formed the ruling class. By the inception of the National Development Policy (NDP 1990-2000), the successor to the NEP, these changes were well underway.

It is also important to consider the changed position of the national Chinese economic elite, given their long-standing prior status as the most influential "leaders" and "celebrities" of local "Chinese society." From the beginning of the NEP, in response to government pressures on Chinese-owned businesses, the wealthiest Chinese business families in Malaysia—bankers, real estate developers, resort owners, manufacturers and monopoly wholesale distributors—not only developed new patronage ties with UMNO leaders, but also moved part of their capital to overseas subsidiaries (Gomez and Jomo 1997:48-49). Over

the same period, the financial influence of the MCA, the political party of large Chinese capital, waned vis-à-vis UMNO leaders, given the greatly increased wealth the latter could draw on from their clients among New Malays (Gomez and Jomo 1997:44). As a result, by the 1990s the MCA had become increasingly ineffectual in representing Chinese economic and cultural interests, even as "the trends toward 'Bumiputerization'…continued unabated, in education, in scholarships, in employment, in privileges for housing, loans, and so on" (Munro-Kua 1996:151).

As a consequence, there was a shift by the wealthiest Chinese fraction of capital away from support of collective Chinese economic and cultural interests identified with "Chinese society." This broader view of the decapitation of the hierarchically organized associations of local "Chinese society"—its abandonment by the national Chinese economic elite—was consistent with what I observed ethnographically in Bukit Mertajam. The wealthiest Chinese in the Penang region made donations to Chinese organizations in the island city of Georgetown but they rarely played leadership roles in these organizations, and this was even more the case in their lack of involvement with the much smaller Chinese population of Bukit Mertajam 15 miles away (as the crow flies) from Georgetown. Instead, these tycoons spent their time cultivating their patronage ties with the Gerakan Party in power in the Penang state government and with national and state UMNO leaders.

The withdrawal of the national Chinese economic elite from financial support of local "Chinese society" was compounded by the exit of middling transnational families noted above. The latter had been "stalwart" members of the associations so their absence resulted in an increasingly formalistic, hollowed-out remnant of what had been a self-conscious diasporic sociocultural formation. By this time, the diasporic imaginary held by an older generation in which the wealthiest merchants sat at the apex of an organizational structure which could be mobilized along segmentary lines of China native-place, clan and commercial associations, to unify Chinese and protect Chinese cultural and commercial interests vis-à-vis state authority, no longer made any sense, if it ever did.[8] Within this imaginary, "Chinese society" was identified with maintaining and protecting the representational spaces most closely associated with the reproduction of a China-based ethnic identity—Chinese-language independent primary and secondary schools, Daoist-Buddhist temples, Chinese cemeteries, native-place association halls and clan halls (Nonini 1998: 447-449)—while wealthy celebrities financed these organizations, and less well-off stalwarts operated them. Although such institutions in Bukit Mertajam rep-

resented the economic and cultural interests of petty Chinese capital in the area, they grew increasingly powerless to counter the class and ethno-racial redistribution of wealth, rights and power central to the NEP and NDP. For example, when, in the late 1970s, a faction of Bukit Mertajam association leaders used this imaginary to make calls demanding that community associations come together in a segmentary hierarchy to create "unity" on the grounds that "to unify is to be strong" vis-à-vis the common enemy—the Malaysian state—their calls were ignored or repudiated by other leaders as ineffectual or too dangerous (Nonini 1998:448-451). Instead, by the late 1990s, Chinese residents of Bukit Mertajam were confronted by the massive material presence of Bumiputera-owned and managed privatized national corporations connected to UMNO and the Malaysian government, whose new constructions encompassed the urban landscape. These took the form of massive, state-subsidized built structures (government office buildings and complexes) and huge multi-story "hypermarkets" (supermarkets of mall size). For instance, not only had the Shariah (Islamic) courthouse long since supplanted the Chinese vegetable wholesalers' depot on the edge of the municipal square, but the latter itself—a large sward of grass where Chinese high school students previously played soccer, music bands performed and police marched on public holidays—had completely disappeared. It had been displaced by an eight-storey hypermarket under construction and financed by a Malay-owned corporation connected to the national government. Such massive state-sponsored projects of commercial and residential construction and the new roads built to provide access to them had razed the squatters' kampongs that had been the site of determined political opposition to the governing party, UMNO, two decades previously. "Working-class Chinese removal" had been widely, if not completely, accomplished.

In fact, such visible displacement was part of a much more inclusive state project of encompassment of local, indeed, regional spaces, which previously bore the impress of Chinese presence and economic control. Maps and their readings may *make* states (Thongchai 1994), but, we might add, only through the implementation of state-initiated political and economic projects. Techniques of state cartography were crucial to the projects of erasure that sought to construct novel state appropriations of space as inevitable, enduring and entirely natural: maps projected the will of state agencies and functionaries through the modality of "development." At the same time, however, these maps pointed to broader projects of class struggle undertaken in the form of making ethno-racial divisions.

One favourite activity of Malaysian state officials was to colour represented spaces in terms of their "development potential." Thus for example in 1992, I found myself speaking to the District Officer. On the wall of his "Operation Room" was a full-length map of the eastern region of the state: filled with spaces of various shapes and sizes marked in blue, red, pink, et cetera:

> Pointing now and then to different areas on the map, he gave his exposition: In Seberang Jaya, an entire township [pointing to a coloured area] is being built, with a new hospital and many other facilities. The district capital for Utara District is being moved from Butterworth to Kepala Batas [pointing again], with the relocation of the district office there. The port facility will be moved up the coast north of Butterworth. A new international airport will be constructed in Bertam, far in the northeast of the state. Within this district proper, the offices of the District will be moved to a new administrative complex at the west end of the town, within the next two years. The work on the segment of the East-West Highway linking the west coast to Kelantan passing near here is just getting underway.

The image, like the word, preceded the deed. During my visits in 1997, 2002 and 2004, I observed that the material effects of these huge projects delineated by state maps years earlier had been undertaken by Bumiputera-owned national corporations and were pervasively in evidence. The new District Office and courthouse had been built on the western edges of downtown and a new road opened to them; this project had displaced the homes of scores of Chinese residents of an urban kampong. The mega-projects of national corporations extended far beyond the town itself to include the entire district and more in a continuous strip of industrial parks, government office complexes and housing projects built by Bumiputera corporations, that extended eastward and southward from the port of Butterworth though Bukit Mertajam to the town of Kulim in southern Kedah thirty miles to the east. Local Chinese developers with connections to UMNO, MCA or Gerakan leaders had also prospered by constructing smaller commercial and housing projects. Still, the material transformations of the local landscape made clear who was really in charge: as Bukit Mertajam Chinese put it, it was "their [Malays'] government" and "their corporations" that were initiating these changes.

These projects manifested the process of class and ethno-racial formation in yet another way. While poorer Chinese had been displaced by these state projects, some obtained the new skilled labour jobs in local businesses (transport, logistics, construction, etc.) serving the influx of new residents and nearby flourishing EPZs and factories, and had moved to live in the new housing projects located in the suburbs of the city. While they had lives of hard physical toil in the workplace, still, given the high levels of employment and regional labour scarcity, they were able in the early 2000s to obtain wages compatible with the new low-end consumer-driven leisurely lifestyle they adopted outside work. However, neither Chinese nor, for that matter, Malay and Indian labourers, were the only members of the working class, which had in fact become stratified such that Chinese workers had become a functional "labour aristocracy." By this time, the new proletariat were immigrant labourers from Indonesia, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, who formed the masses of industrial and construction labourers employed in these mega-projects. Other Indonesian immigrants worked as domestic servants of professional or business families living in town, or as workers in the small shops and factories owned by the latter.

By the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, new forms of state-enforced industrial discipline had come into effect, evident when huge numbers of Indonesian labourers were rounded up by police, harassed and many subjected to torture, then deported, leading hundreds of thousands of Indonesians to return in panicked flight from Malaysia to Indonesia (Far Eastern Economic Review 1998). These new oppressions of labour aimed at foreign migrant labourers not only indexed the new division of labour within ASEAN, and more broadly the Asian region, regarding national "comparative advantage" in labour specializations, but also conveyed a new message of intimidation to Chinese and other Malaysian workers. It reminded them of what could happen to them if the militancy of domestic labourers increased or if less flourishing economic conditions dictated a more coercive response by the state to the unruliness of labour.

Conclusion

Gerald Sider (2003, 2006) in his historical research on social reproduction in Newfoundland and North Carolina reminds us of the processes by which states work on behalf of capital to shape new ethno-racial identities of workers tied to differential citizenship, thus providing a political means of regulating labour markets, and allowing capital to subject specific fractions of the working class to hyper-exploitative conditions within contemporary (and historical) labour processes. This historical ethnography of urban Malaysia amply confirms Sider's broader claims.

Moreover, Sider points out that the processes of exporting human beings and their labour power were evident both in Newfoundland and, in the case of North Car-

olina agriculture, in Mexico. These processes threaten the social reproduction of the communities from which labourers come. A similar process clearly exists in the most recent phase of postcolonial Malaysian capitalism from the 1980s onward, when tiered transnational labour markets segmented by ethno-racial groups and nationalities began to emerge throughout the Asia Pacific region in two phases. In the first phase from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, Malaysia became a source for the export of labour, predominantly Chinese, to the "3-D" and domestic labour markets of Japan and Taiwan—regional centres of accumulation at the time. As I have reported in previous work (Nonini 1997), such experiences left migrant labourers from Bukit Mertajam who had worked illicitly in Japan with little to show at the end of two or three years on their necessary return to Malaysia, and for the most part, intensified their desperate sense of being stuck in Malaysia, and being taken advantage of by labour recruiters, Japanese employers, and the Malaysian government. In the second phase (1990s-2000s), Malaysia became an importer of large numbers of labourers from nearby countries (Indonesia, Philippines, Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan etc.) to work in the most exploitative sectors of Malaysia's post-Asian crisis economy—construction, labour-intensive industry, and domestic work—where their working conditions were essentially unregulated by the state. As Sider's (2003, 2006) work suggests, the social reproduction of such imported people within their countries of origin has over the longer term become increasingly problematic and insecure.

If Chinese labourers were able to move into the structural position of the "labour aristocracy" under these new conditions, they acquired few privileges in doing so, for they had exhausted the exit option and found themselves still discriminated against by corporations and the state alike. What made their conditions bearable under these repressive conditions was the burgeoning export economy, in which they were able to find work in the Chinese petty capitalist sector due to the scarcity of skilled labour. It was in this sector that I witnessed class struggle between labourers and their employers over the terms of exploitation (Nonini 1999). Yet struggle was to a large extent hidden, as employers misrecognized this as a conflict over worker theft (of "rice-eating money"), and male workers' "crudeness" and "disputatiousness," even as they saw their profits declining and felt under assault by a predatory Malaysian state and the "race" it supported. And, like the rest of this historical ethnography, the struggle was over the spaces that capital, the state, and labour each sought to control, and it extended over long distances of space (Nonini 1999).

Despite the massive displacement of class struggle in the direction of contentions over ethno-racial domination and suffering by the hegemonic projects of the Malaysian state, class has not gone away in Malaysia. It is just that those who have suffered its injuries have not yet looked across ethno-racial divisions to be reminded of what they already know.

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Notes

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2 I employ the concept of "ethno-racial group" rather than either "ethnic group" or "race" in what follows because I accept Alonso's (1994:391) argument that both "ethnic groups" and "races" are deeply implicated in the projects of state formation, but would argue that recent work on the "new racism" (e.g., Gilroy 2000) holds that essential differences defining fundamental inequalities between groups may be defined either by physical or cultural traits attributed to groups. What matters is that these essentialized and unequal differences arise from the dynamics of group recognition by states (Omi and Winant 1994). In this sense, which *kind* of traits are attributed to a group matters less than that these traits index an essential difference between groups and signal a ranking between groups sanctioned by the state.

3 The connection between state formation, ethno-racial identities, and spatiality is one that Alonso (1994) makes in her important *Annual Review* essay.

4 These myths were exemplified in the stereotypes set out for instance in the social Darwinist tract *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), written by Mahathir Mohamad, later to become Prime Minister for more than two decades.

5 Indians, most of whom were poor and lived in large numbers on plantations, nonetheless were, I would argue, classified as "urban" in that the British saw them as having no moral rights to reside in rural areas, despite the manifest dependence of rural plantations on them for labour. In this respect, their absence of a status associated with rights to land situated them, like Chinese, as "urban."

6 For instance, these tropes were present in the written biographies of prominent businessmen and contributors in the community association "memorial books" periodically published on noteworthy anniversaries such as the 10th or 25th anniversary of the founding of the organization.

7 "Build-operate-transfer" is an arrangement by which a contractor builds and then operates an infrastructural project (e.g., a toll road or bridge), in return for which profits are

transferred to the contractor for a set period of time.

8 Even as late as the 1960s anthropologists still proffered this imaginary of *an imperio in imperium* as if it could be taken at face value as a model of social organization for urban "overseas Chinese" (e.g., Crissman 1967).

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