

RESEARCH BRIEF

Unhomeliness and Human Agency in Translational Encounters: Exploring the Negotiation of Identities of the Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia

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This essay proposes a framework to understand the identity of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, including the strategies available to them to negotiate various overlapping conditions of (un)belonging in ethnic, national, and global imaginaries. Our intervention emerges from a discontent with dominant ways of understanding the global movement and settlement of the ethnic Chinese that predominantly draw from models that privilege East-to-West movements and transactions. We aver that such models tend to rely almost exclusively on minoritarian frameworks, homogenizing the experience of the diasporic Chinese despite their geographical, historical, social, and even cultural diversity—that is to say, designating them as a disadvantaged minority group vis-à-vis the dominant white westerners (Ang, 2001; Ma, 1998; Khoo, 2005; Teng, 2005; Wang, 2012). However, this dichotomous framework is not universally applicable. How about the Chinese diaspora within Asia, such as the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia? How about the ethnic Chinese who do not constitute the minority group, such as the Singaporean Chinese? How about the ethnic Chinese who are not in a completely disadvantaged position, such as the ethnic Chinese in many countries in Southeast Asia?

It is apparent that the ethnic Chinese experience in Southeast Asia cannot be completely explained by conventional oppositional categories such as colonized/colonizer, native/settler, or periphery/center.

We propose three concepts that we suggest are crucial in understanding the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia: (a) the unhomely, (b) flexible citizenship, and (c) passing. Such concepts remain neglected in current scholarship on the diasporic Chinese, and we underscore their importance in understanding the experience of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia in the age of globalization. In the contemporary context, the issue of identity and belonging of the ethnic Chinese is getting more complicated as they are informed by the entanglement of regionalism and modernization of Southeast Asia, the rise of modern China, and the shifting landscapes of globalization (Setijadi, 2016; Yow, 2017). Although the majority of the Chinese have acquired citizenship in the country where they live, there are still some discrimination and resentment against the ethnic Chinese, especially in times of social instability (Hau, 2014, pp. 137–139). There are still sporadic anti-Chinese protests in some countries in recent years, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and so on. In such a complicated context, how is the identity of the ethnic Chinese de/constructed? Do they feel at home in the countries where they live? Is the sense of unhomely simply a result of the minority or disadvantaged status? Below we elaborate on those three concepts, providing a synoptic discussion of their historical and theoretical foundations as well as their utility. What we offer in this essay is primarily a theoretical discussion, and the application of those

concepts as tools for analysis will be part of future iterations of this project.

(Un)belonging in Translational Encounters: A Proposed Framework

To examine the issues, we propose a theoretical framework based on the aforementioned three concepts. We acknowledge Stuart Hall's (1990) elaboration on cultural identity that recognizes the diversity of diasporic identity. As such, some may feel at home while others may not. We first look into the concept of unhomey proposed, which can be used to examine the sense of alienation and displacement initiated by translational experience and traumas. As we not only recognize the influence of the context on one's sense of belonging but also on human agency in locating and constructing identities, we then conjure up Aihwa Ong's (1999) concept of flexible citizenship, which highlights people's strategies for employing capitals and resources to position oneself. Although such a highlighting strategy is useful, it is not all-inclusive. People might also hide part of who they are to position themselves. This leads us to include the concept of passing, which can be deployed to examine those who want to transgress boundaries in an alternative way. Our framework can be illustrated in Figure 1.

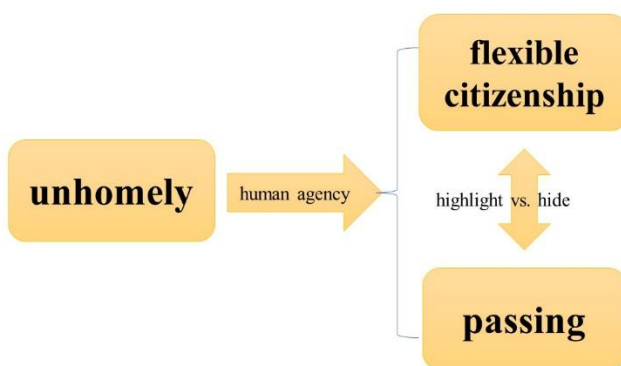


Figure 1. Proposed Framework of (Un)belonging in Translational Encounters

After briefly introducing the theoretical framework, we now would like to elaborate on the three concepts in detail.

The Unhomey

In his canonical essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall (1990) argued that there are two different ways of understanding cultural identity. The first way is the essentialist approach, which defines cultural identity in terms of “oneness” (p. 223). This approach, however, neglects the diversity and heterogeneity which lie “beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (Hall, 1990, p. 223). To rectify that neglect, Hall (1990) proposed a second view that recognizes the differences, diversities, and “ruptures and discontinuities” of the constructions of cultural identity (p. 225). In his analysis, Hall (1990) also pointed out the conditionality of identity formation: identity is “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (p. 225). The conditionality then leads to the positionality of cultural identity because it involves how “we are positioned by” and how “we position ourselves” within specific contexts (Hall, 1990, p. 255).

Given that cultural identity is composed of “heterogeneity and diversity” (Hall, 1990, p. 235), one's sense of belonging is also necessarily diverse. In diaspora studies, what gets more attention is usually the negative feelings, such as alienation and displacement (Brazier & Mannur, 2003; Safran, 1991; Sarris & Frankenberg, 1996). Although we do not deny the sense of unhomeyness of diasporic subjects, we question the simplistic assumption that the feeling of unhomeyness is exclusively a minoritarian emotion. As aforementioned, the ethnic Chinese are not a completely disadvantaged group in Southeast Asia. Instead, their status is often ambivalent (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 12; Hau, 2014, p. 56; Ho, 2021, pp. 8-9). Also, although they are ethnic minorities in most countries in Southeast Asia, they are the ethnic majority in Singapore. Yet, there are also depictions of the ethnic Chinese who feel unhomey in the countries where they reside. Their unhomeyness, we suggest, can be partly attributed to “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 13). Bhabha's (2004) theory of the unhomey is quite appropriate for examining the lives of people who occupy the “Third Space” (p. 54) or translational spaces, such as the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. The term translation is employed in its inflected meaning as was proposed by Bhabha (1990), Rushdie (1991), and Hall (1992), which is used to describe

those identity formations which cut across and intersect natural frontiers, and which are composed of people who have been dispersed forever from their homelands...they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures. (p. 310)

The term translation suggests a crossing of borders and boundaries, not only geographical but also cultural and social ones, thus being capable of covering both the connotation of transnational and transcultural and even boundary crossing in other perspectives, such as economy, politics, gender, and so on. For the ethnic Chinese Southeast Asia, they live with the legacy of diaspora as their ancestors traverse the border to migrate and settle down in Southeast Asia. Also, in the context of globalization and the multicultural and multiracial societies of Southeast Asia, many ethnic Chinese continue to cross borders and encounter transnational and transcultural issues at both macro and micro levels, which keep on informing and complicating their identity and sense of belonging.

After an elaboration on the term translation, we now go back to the elaboration of the concept of unhomey. Bhabha (2004) conscripted the Freudian concept of “the unhomey” and in so doing shifted the realm of the concept from “a purely psycho-sexual” field to “a more worldly state of location, topoi, place, and perceptions of place” (Nayar, 2010, p. 89). Instead of attributing the unhomey to the castration complex (Freud, 2003, p. 140), Bhabha (2004) argued that the unhomey moments of personal trauma and psychic history should be considered in conjunction with “political existence” (p. 15). Although Freud (2003) perceived the return of the repressed mainly as a “personal sense of childhood,” Bhabha extended it to “the collective, historical past” that informs the “dislocations of postcolonial reality” (Britton, 1999, p. 121). Bhabha (2004) suggested that the word unhomey “captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeyness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (p. 13). Thus, translational encounters can blur boundaries “between home and world,” between “the private and the public,” leaving people with “a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 13). Bhabha (2004) remarked that “the unhomey moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself ... taking

the measure of your dwelling in a state of ‘incredulous terror’” (p.13). Accordingly, people are left with a shocking realization of “the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (Bhabha, 1992, p. 142), which correlates with Freud’s argument on the convergence of the meaning of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Based on such logic, Bhabha (2004) suggested that being unhomey does not mean being homeless. Rather, it emphasizes the sense of alienation and estrangement.

What is particular about the diasporic context is that the unhomey is often invested with and complicated by cultural, social, and political elements. Although the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia have become localized citizens, they still live the legacy of diaspora. “Extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 13) continue to inform and complicate their living experience and sense of belonging. In some countries where the ethnic Chinese are racial minorities, they still face unfavorable conditions and discrimination, although to a lesser extent (Chin, 2011; Gabriel, 2014; Hau, 2014). In Singapore, where the Chinese form the ethnic majority, concerns and anxieties over “global mobility and cultural transformation” (Goh, 2008, p. 239) and tension between the local and the global, the East and the West, the traditional and the modern, Orientalism and Occidentalism (Chin, 2005, p. 25; Holden, 2010, p. 286; Ommundsen, 2011, p. 109; Orthofer, 2016, p. 324; Wagner, 2003, p. 35), are all likely to invoke unhomey feelings. Therefore, we believe that Bhabha’s theory of the unhomey is applicable in examining the identity and sense of belonging of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Given the diversity and heterogeneity of lived experiences of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, the sense of belonging is subjectively experienced by individuals. Therefore, we propose to incorporate Freud’s theory of the unhomey, which addresses the psychological and sexual perspectives, to examine the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the unhomey. In his seminal essay “Das Unheimliche,” Freud (2003) elaborated and developed the concept of the uncanny, a term originally proposed by German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch. Freud (2003) traced the etymology and the complex connotations of the German word *das unheimliche*, whose nearest semantic equivalent is uncanny or eerie, whereas the etymological equivalent is unhomey in English. Freud (2003) defined the uncanny as a “species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long

been familiar” (p.124). By investigating the meaning of the word *heimlich*, Freud (2003) discovered its contradictory meanings as it can refer to something familiar and comfortable on the one hand but something hidden and concealed on the other hand. Therefore, when meaning the latter, *heimlich* takes on an ominous dimension with its antonym *unheimlich*, and finally, the uncanny/unhomely becomes homely. Given the contradiction and unity between unhomely and homely, Freud (2003) proposed that the prefix “un” in unhomely is an “indicator of repression” (p. 151) rather than negation. Hence, the uncanny/unhomely is used to describe thoughts and feelings that arise when “the familiar becomes uncomfortably unfamiliar or the unfamiliar becomes strangely familiar” (Bennett & Royle, 2014, p. 40). When things are supposed to “remain secret, hidden away ... come into the open” (Freud, 2003, p. 132), an unhomely effect emerges. In the Southeast Asia context, as some politicians tend to use racial issues to provoke tension, the ethnic Chinese are still vulnerable to sporadic discrimination and resentment, especially during times of social instability, which can arouse the traumatic memory of the discrimination, hatred, and violence against the ethnic Chinese decades ago. For instance, in East Timor, the nationalist propaganda before its declaration of independence in 1975 and the succeeding invasion by Indonesia all activated memories of events of the persecution of ethnic Chinese (Huber, 2021, p. 70).

As Freud’s theory of the unhomely deals with the psychological perspective, we can employ it to examine how personal experiences, memories, and secrets—individualized or collective—contribute to the unhomely feeling of the ethnic Chinese. Combining Freud’s and Bhabha’s theories of the unhomely, we can also securitize the intersectionality of different factors in shaping unhomely feelings.

Flexible Citizenship

Although the unhomely might be taken for granted as a typical symptom of diaspora, we would like to suggest that it is not necessarily always the case because human beings are not passive subjects and, depending on their circumstances, would have various resources at their disposal to endure and even benefit from their condition. They can employ strategies to interact and negotiate with the contingent contexts.

As the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia constitute a group *par excellence* who live in “the Third Space of enunciation” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 54) and build lives around the negotiations of “the powers of cultural difference” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 13), hybridity and fluidity of identity is a defining feature. A concept that attempts to elaborate on such a strategic advantage is Aihwa Ong’s (1999) theory of flexible citizenship, which refers to “strategies to accumulate capital and power” (p. 6) in different circumstances.

As defined by Ong (1999), flexible citizenship refers to the “cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (p. 6). The notion delineates the new norm of the diasporic or ethnic Chinese as they deploy strategies to “circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments, work, and family relocation” (Ong, 1999, p. 112), an experience that is quite different from the older generation of diasporic Chinese who usually have strong emotional attachments to China. By employing flexible citizenship, the diasporic subjects can enjoy more benefits and conveniences, such as better educational resources, personal development, more employment options, and expanded geopolitical spaces (Fong, 2011, p. 187). This is especially evident for those in the upper-class, the multicultural managers, and the multiply-passport holders (Ong, 1999, p. 19), such as business tycoons, the elites, and the professionals in transnational corporations. In recent years, many ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia actively participate in and make a profit from the projects of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Ren & Liu, 2022, p. 882). By engaging in global capitalism, these people benefit a lot from the flexibility and mobility they possess, live a cosmopolitan life, and do not bother much with issues such as identity and belonging. Thus, the concept of flexible citizenship is quite applicable to them.

Mainly employed by male elite and professional transnational subjects (Ong, 1999, pp. 112, 127), flexible citizenship has class and gender dimensions as it can be experienced differently by females and non-elites (Fong, 2011; Kanna, 2010; Waters, 2002). Although flexible citizenship seems to focus on the agency of individuals, nation-states also contribute to its cultivation. It should be noted that despite the benefits and convenience brought by flexible

citizenship, traditional regimes of truth and power, such as nation-states and family, still exert a huge influence on individuals (Ong, 1999, p. 108). Also, nation-states may constantly change their policies to adjust to the influx of different kinds of migrants so that they can benefit with little cost (Ong, 1999, p. 112). Hence, sometimes flexible citizenship can only function to a certain extent (Choi, 2018; Lee, 2006). And sometimes, the disadvantages of flexible citizenship can outweigh its advantages (Fong, 2011; Waters, 2002). Therefore, the nature of flexible citizenship is complicated and even inherently contradictory. Such complicated and contradictory effects on the identity and belonging of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia can be further studied.

Also important to recognize is that flexible citizenship is related to strategic capital accumulation. Thus, capital is a key factor in shaping flexible citizenship. In his essay “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu (1986) elaborated on three types of capital: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. Economic capital, the major factor in the construction of flexible citizenship, enjoys considerable currency in the discussion of flexible citizenship. Yet, in exploring the experiences of wealthy and powerful Chinese migrants, Aihwa Ong (1999) proposed that the strategy of flexible citizenship denotes to include not only economic capital but also cultural capital. For the diasporic and ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, they can employ different types of capital—cultural, economic, and political—to position themselves and to seek benefits and belonging. Besides, they can convert some forms of capital to other forms. For instance, the ethnic Chinese can make use of cultural capital, such as multilingualism and intercultural literacy, to engage in transnational capitalism, thus transforming cultural capital into economic capital. In our project, we will look into how the ethnic Chinese employ the capitals they possess and convert different forms of capital to position themselves.

Passing

In her elaboration on flexible citizenship, Ong (1999) pointed out that by employing the strategy of flexible citizenship, people usually highlight the resources they have to acquire capital and power. Needless to say, the strategy of highlighting one’s

resources is only one of several strategies available to the diasporic subject. What if people selectively hide part of who they are to position themselves and seek a sense of belonging? This question leads us to include the concept of passing, a strategy of camouflage that is different and, to some extent, contradictory to flexible citizenship.

In a broader sense, passing can be defined as “people effectively present[ing] themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be” (Kroeger, 2003, p. 7). It can be realized through “impersonation, masquerade, drag, crossing over” (Rust, 1996, p. 22) and information management (Goffman, 1963, p. 42). Historically, the term is related to the discourse of racial difference in the United States and is used to refer to the phenomenon of light-skinned African American or a person of multiracial ancestry pretending to be white to escape the abuse, cruelty, and discrimination brought about by racial segregation (Ginsberg, 1996, pp. 1-3; Rottenberg, 2003, p. 435).

Although a natural logic of passing is that people tend to avoid unfavorable social contexts and pursue opportunities and privileges which are not accessible to certain identity categories (Alexander, 2004, pp. 378–380; Einwohner, 2008, pp. 123–125; Ginsberg, 1996, p. 3; Goffman, 1963, p. 48, 74; Renfrow, 2004, p. 488), studies suggest that the motivation behind passing can be more complex and ambiguous than people have assumed (Ginsberg, 1996; Renfrow, 2004; Wald, 2000), such as when white pass as black, straight pass as queer, abled pass as disabled, and so on.

Whatever the motivation behind passing, it interrogates “the ontology of identity categories and their construction” (Ginsberg, 1996, p. 4). Firstly, passing challenges problematic and antithetical assumptions about identities, which are usually operated by compelling subjects to follow and repeat the norms of identity categories (Alexander, 2004, p. 383; Rottenberg, 2003, p. 441). As such, passing reveals “the anxieties and contradictions of a racially stratified society,” poses an “identity crisis,” and “destabilizes the grounds of privilege” linked to certain types of identities (Ginsberg, 1996, p. 8–13). Secondly, passing problematizes the preconception, which takes the visible as “a guarantor of truth” (Robinson, 1994, p. 719). What is seen does not necessarily make available an authentic identity. Thirdly, by exposing spaces and slippages through which dominant identity discourse can be challenged, appropriated, and

rearticulated (Rottenberg, 2003; Wald, 2000), passing offers an alternative framework for understanding identity (Alexander, 2004; Robinson, 1994), thus challenging the biological foundation, social, and cultural construction of identity categories, such as ethnicity (Ginsberg, 1996, pp. 4-5). As a strategy, passing can also help people fit into groups that they have not belonged to previously and enhance their sense of belonging.

As passing is about border crossing, it is often double-faced or ambivalent (Alexander, 2004; Ginsberg, 1996; Rottenberg, 2003; Rust, 1996; Sommerville, 2000), involving both “their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties...the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen” (Ginsberg, 1996, p. 2), the performance and the interpretation, the passer, and the audience (Einwohner, 2008, p. 123; Renfrow, 2004, p. 489). As such, the subversive power of passing cannot be exaggerated. Wald (2000) argued that the success of identity passing is based on a binary construction of identity categories (p. 187), which somehow reinforces the binarism or hegemony that it tries to challenge (Rottenberg, 2003, p. 435). Some scholars argue that passing is conditioned by the specific political, cultural, and social context in which such a tactic is deployed (Einwohner, 2008, p. 134; Ginsberg, 1996, p. 2-3). There are also the possibilities that passing might be discovered (Goffman, 1963, p. 75) and that one’s passing may encounter violent reactions (Ginsberg, 1996, p. 13). So, passing can also mean risk, threat, prosecution, additional efforts, and anxiety (Ginsberg, 1996, p. 13; Goffman, 1963, pp. 10, 75, 87; Sommerville, 2000, p. 83). Wall (1986) even argued that passing can entail loss, denial, and even “a metaphor of death and desperation” (p. 105).

Initially employed in African American studies, the concept of passing has gradually been extended to other social categories of identity, such as gender, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, and physical integrity (Ginsberg, 1996; Kroeger, 2003; Renfrow, 2004; Wald, 2000), which demonstrates its wide scope of applicability. Even though passing is not a widely employed concept in diaspora studies, it also interrogates a fixed understanding of identity and points out the human agency in crossing and even transgressing boundaries to position identity and to seek a sense of belonging. Hence, it resonates with Hall’s theory of cultural identity and Ong’s theory of

flexible citizenship. Also, as mentioned previously, the dominant framework that places diasporic Chinese as a minority group vis-à-vis the dominant white Westerners is not universally applicable. Like fair-skinned African Americans who pass as white, diasporic Chinese can pass as and become “natives” in other Asian countries if there is no apparent physical difference. There are possibilities that diasporic Chinese of other identity categories—class, gender, sexuality, and so forth—pass as certain identities when there are spaces and opportunities for slippage and crossing. In some Southeast Asia countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar, the difference between the ethnic Chinese and other ethnic groups is not easy to discern, especially for those who have settled down for generations. Thus, in some unfavorable contexts, some ethnic Chinese had changed names and hid their ethnicity as locals for survival, development, and a sense of belonging. To avoid discrimination and trouble, some ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia created two names: a localized name that is used in public spaces to pass as natives, and a Chinese name that is only used on private occasions. Thus, the strategy of passing can also be employed to position oneself, avoid unfavorable conditions, and seek certain benefits and a sense of belonging. Therefore, the trope of passing offers a supplementary and alternative lens for understanding diasporic identity and belonging, thus promoting the analysis of human agency and expanding the repertoire of diaspora studies. Yet, given that effect of passing is conditioned by many factors, we believe that how the ethnic Chinese respond to the different effects of passing also needs further examination, which will be included in our future research.

Conclusion

As a research brief, this paper proposes a new framework to better understand the complexity of the identity and belonging of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. By interrogating the simplistic assumption that the unhomely feeling of diasporic subjects is attributed to their minority status, this paradigm calls for a more comprehensive analysis of the unhomely. Meanwhile, this paper recognizes human agency in positioning identity and seeking a sense of belonging. We propose two concepts, flexible citizenship and passing, as two mechanisms of survival

or advantage. Given the complexity of the issue of identity and belonging, we propose that complicated by translational encounters and often entangled in the disjuncture of economy, culture, politics, affect, and memory, the identification of diasporic or ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia is always in a state of negotiation between human agency and contingent context, which can lead to multiple shifts in identity and sense of belonging.

Since this framework is theoretical rather than applied, we do not include its applications in this paper. Some application has been presented in other papers we have written. As the identity and the ethnic Chinese “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (Hall, 1990, p. 225), their identification may change with the mutations of the complicated and contingent contexts. Also, they might employ strategies other than flexible citizenship and passing to position themselves and seek a sense of belonging. Therefore, what we have presented in this paper is a framework and a possible trend in the field. And the next phase of this project is to place these concepts in conversation with relevant cultural texts to further explore and define their scope and utility.

Declaration of ownership

This report is our original work.

Conflict of interest

None.

Ethical clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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