

RE-VISITING MALAY STEREOTYPES: A CASE STUDY AMONG MALAYSIAN AND INDONESIAN CHINESE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine the content of Malay stereotypes from both Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese students' population. Applying the association method, a sample of Chinese undergraduates was asked to provide general information about the concepts associated with the Malays. Analyses of the stereotypes indicated that the content of Malay stereotypes can be grouped into four separate themes i.e. food association, physical appearances, current issues and belief and attitude. Results also indicate that there is a difference between the Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese students' contents of stereotype. Issues on communication competency are also discussed.

1.0 Introduction

Stereotypes are mental representations that people have for members of a group (racial or ethnic groups, gender, etc). These mental representations *typically exaggerate the differences between groups and minimise differences of people within the same group* (MacLin and Herrera, 2006).

Stereotypes play the role in filling the gap in the absence of concrete information about people of a particular group and thus permit easy categorisation and decision-making (Larsen, 1979). This is demonstrated in the study by Asch (1946) where impression-formation happens in the process of minimal information.

While literatures on stereotypes can be traced back to the 1940s, during which the interest on studying this concept seemed to emerge and gradually gained popularity among social science researchers, the trend of studies on stereotypes as indicated by existing literatures has shown that this phenomenon has invited various approaches among the researchers involved.

Much of the early study (e.g. Bruner and Tagiuri, 1954) on stereotypes involves the attempt to understand what it is and how it happens and focuses on the accuracy of perceptions. Later, studies on how stereotypes are maintained by individuals (Clark & Kashima, 2007; Lyons & Kashima, 2003; Fiske, 1998; Hilton & von Hippel, 1996) indicate that researchers have long recognised that individuals tend to maintain rather than change stereotypes despite receiving evidence that counters them.

According to Haslam (2001), the favourite method of studying stereotypes is *experiments*. However, in most studies mentioned above, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. In most studies, stereotypes are treated as the independent variable influencing other

tested variables. However, not much suggestion or emphasis are given on the measures to curb or control stereotypes in total. This is because stereotypes can only be controlled in terms of its spread, maintenance and impacts.

2.0 Perceived Malay Stereotypes

Much has been said about Malay stereotypes. More interesting is the question of to what extent the stereotypes held by the population conform to the views held by outside the Malay society. What do the Chinese in Malaysia and Indonesia think about the Malay society?

Interestingly, both positive and negative traits of the Malays have long been discussed. Norraesah (2005) puts Swettenham's *Malay Sketches (1984)* and Mahathir's *The Malay Dilemma (1981)* interpretations of the Malays by tabulating the traits into two categories (Figure 1). Surprisingly, there are more negative traits as compared to positive traits in Mahathir's *The Malay Dilemma* despite his background.

Figure 1 - Norraesah's Summary of Malay Traits Based on Swettenham's *Malay Sketches* and Mahathir's *The Malay Dilemma*

	Negative Traits	Positive Traits
1.	Lazy	Kind
2.	Lethargic	Polite
3.	Conservative	Courageous
4.	Disorderly and undisciplined	Trustworthy
5.	Complacent	Good sense of humour
6.	Incorrigible borrower	Good talker
7.	Extravagant	Loyal
8.	Suspicious of innovations	Respect for authority
9.	Not adaptable to change	
10.	Easy going	
11.	Idyllic	
12.	Generally poor interest in trade & craftsmanship	
13.	Misconception of political power (without other strength as guarantee at all)	

Asmah (2005) consequently argues that the Malays have all the time been branding themselves, both positively and negatively, showing that they are able to appraise themselves as they do others. At the same time, the Malays get branded from others as well. Branding of the Malays by themselves and by others takes place everyday in ordinary conversations, but not much gets into writing for the obvious reasons that people do not want to "appear nasty". This in itself is an indication that branding of a person or a character leans more towards the negative rather than the positive.

In a study by Rabushka (1973), the Chinese in Malaysia are found to be more ethnocentric than the Malays and at the same time more tolerant of them than are Malays of Chinese.

The explanation of this duality may lie in the Chinese historical experience. Being the descendents of the dominant Asian civilisation, they are more self-confident, more cosmopolitan and more accustomed to dealing with outsiders. In any event, distrust and hostility seem to be more characteristic of Malays than of Chinese.

Comparatively, Malaysia has not experienced significant incidents of discrimination against the Chinese like its Indonesian counterparts despite having gone through the May 13, 1969 incident (civil unrest along the racial lines), which happened more than 40 years ago. Most Malaysian Chinese have continued to lead comfortable lives, unlike the Indonesian Chinese. The Indonesian Chinese enjoyed a large share in the economy especially during the Suharto era, but when he stepped down as President, things began to change. However, the Chinese in Indonesia continue to hold the biggest share in the economy (CQ, 2007).

How then do the Chinese in these two countries perceive the Malays? As they have been presented in the literature, stereotypes can serve as indexes of the consensus between group members concerning the attribution of particular characteristics to specific targets.

Researchers have suggested that the measurement and documentation of stereotypes have considerable social significance and it is essential to a complete analysis of international relations and issues associated with the development of government policies (McTiernan and Knox, 1979)

One of the consequences of this concern with the social implications of stereotyping has been an emphasis on a taxonomic approach to the study of stereotype contents. Thus, much of the research in the field has adhered to a format in which respondents from various populations have been asked to characterise a variety of ethnic, national and socio-economic groups, the choice of samples and target groups being dependent upon the prevailing interests of those researchers who are concerned with specific social issues.

At this point, it is useful to re-gather the stereotypes to see how these views accord with those held by the present Chinese, particularly the Chinese students. We know from various studies (e.g. Rabushka, 1973) that Malaysian Chinese have both negative and positive stereotypes of the Malays which include prominent descriptions of stereotypes such as lazy and proud, yet loyal and polite. Nonetheless, the lack of studies involving the perception of Indonesian Chinese is apparent.

This study therefore reports impression formation or stereotypes under conditions where the stimulus persons are racially different. What are the Malay stereotypes as perceived by Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese students and how do they experience communication with the Malays?

3.0 Method

3.1 Participants

The participants (N=81) who took part in the survey were Chinese students from three universities in the Klang Valley in central West Malaysia who were approached separately

in several groups by a Chinese lecturer. 70 students were Malaysian and 11 were Indonesian. 41% of the participants were male and 59% were female.

3.2 Instruments

In this study, the participants were asked to list down the first 10 things that come to mind when they hear the word 'Malay'. This method was used to elicit strong associations (MacLin and Herrera, 2006). The participants were also asked to indicate demographic characteristics such as age and gender. Participants had to be convinced and assured that their responses would solely be used for academic purposes as most of them felt it was a sensitive issue. The participants were later asked to answer two questions; "How do you find your communication experience with the Malay students?" and "How do you think your communication with the Malay students can be improved?"

4.0 Findings and Discussion

160 items emerged after several deductions of items which carried the same meaning, for instance, 'racist' and 'prejudiced' towards other races. The words that meant the same were merged into one item. Matching items were later grouped and categorised into four themes. Out of the 160 items, 15 items fell into Theme 1 (food association), 13 items into Theme 2 (physical appearance), 35 items into Theme 3 (current issues) and 97 items matched each other in Theme 4 (belief and attitude).

The items derived were further listed according to the five mostly reported items. As shown in Table 1 below, *nasi lemak* and *halal food* topped the list with the frequency of 16 each. These were followed by other types of food which are often associated with Malays which are *mamak cuisine* (8), *satay* (5), and *rendang* (4). Such associations i.e. *nasi lemak* and *halal food* are well known among the Malay community and have gradually gained popularity among the non-Malays as well.

In Theme 1, '*nasi lemak*' being on top of the list is not surprising since the Malays have always been known to have it during breakfast or even supper. Non-Malays who frequent Malay stalls for breakfast would more often than not find '*nasi lemak*' as a consistent choice of food. As a matter of fact, '*nasi lemak*' is currently being 'internationalised' as it is served as a choice of meal in both domestic and international flights and conditioned to have a less spicy flavour. *Halal food*, on the other hand, is mentioned almost everywhere in this country especially when it involves Malay eaters. Restaurants which serve Chinese cuisines nowadays have started to greatly consider obtaining the *halal* status from the religious authority in order to entice Malay customers or the Moslems in general. Furthermore, when the Chinese invite any Malay friends to eat, usually the first thing that this Chinese should find out and tell his Malay friends is that the place that they are going to eat serves *halal food*. It has also been a widely known fact among the Malaysians that the Malays will not eat pork or any of its derivatives and animals which are not slaughtered in the Islamic way as these are considered *non-halal*.

The pattern of stereotypes items in this category between the Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese students is similar in which the Indonesian Chinese also reported the *halal food* item in one of the top ten list.

Table 1 – Perceived Malay Stereotype; Theme 1 ~ Food Association (n=70)

	Item	Frequency
1	<i>Nasi lemak</i>	16
2	<i>Halal food</i>	16
3	<i>Mamak cuisine</i>	8
4	<i>Satay</i>	5
5	<i>Rendang</i>	4

The most common item in Theme 2 as can be seen in Table 2 is *tudung* (scarf) which was written 14 times. This is followed by dark/brown skin (7), *baju kurung* (3), pretty girls (2) and good looking (2). The ‘dark brown’ item is consistent with the earlier description by Mahathir (1981). Malay females in Malaysia are well known for their *tudung* and *baju kurung* and in fact these two items have become more fashionable following the demands from sophisticated and urban Malay ladies.

Tudung is definitely representative of the Malay females whereby the wearing of *tudung* is a common thing nowadays. Malay females wearing *tudung* can be found at most places even though it is not uncommon to find others who do not wear it. However, in the Malaysian scenario, most females who wear *tudung* are Moslems who happen to be Malays, despite the existence of Moslems of other ethnic background who wear *tudung* too. The Indonesian Chinese students however did not report any item in this category.

Table 2 – Perceived Malay Stereotype; Theme 2 ~ Physical Appearance (n=70)

	Item	Frequency
1	<i>Tudung</i>	14
2	Dark/Brown skin	7
3	<i>Baju kurung</i>	3
4	Pretty girls	2
5	Good looking	2

Theme 3 (Table 3 below) consists of items which represents current or existing issues which the Chinese students associate with the Malays in general. In this category, *mat rempit* (illegal racer) tops the list (22) while government/politics is ranked second (19).

In this theme, *mat rempit* has become one of the mostly discussed issues in this country. Such menace that bothers the so-called peaceful traffic in this country especially during nights has been a national issue and become a widely debated topic that is given a special attention by the parliament. The fact is that most of the *mat rempit* reported and shown in the media are Malay youngsters. As such, it is not surprising to see that it is popularly associated with the Malays.

The association with Government or politics can be explained by the fact the Malaysian government is at present led by a group of Malay leaders and a majority of government,

federal and state, seats are occupied by the Malays. This can in fact be traced to the history of the Malayan Union, the formation of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and also the existing fact that Malays form the majority population in this country. The involvement of Chinese and Indian leaders in politics is as representatives who represent their own races in the political party.

In comparison with the Indonesian Chinese students, no item is reported in this category.

Table 3 – Perceived Malay Stereotype; Theme 3 ~ Current Issues (n=70)

	Item	Frequency
1	<i>Mat rempit</i>	22
2	Government/Politics	19
3	Advantages/Privileges	16
4	Majority	12
5	Big family	11

Finally, Theme 4 represents the traits which the Chinese students view the Malays, either individually or as a group to carry in their daily lives. In this category, 'lazy' (36 times) is on top of the list and followed by 'religious' (32 times).

In this theme, a similarity between both Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese students and previous studies (e.g. Rabushka, 1973; Norraesah, 2005, etc) is apparent where the Malays are associated with 'lazy' and 'religious'. This is followed by the description 'laid back tendency' of the Malays and their strong affiliation with Islam. 'Lazy' has always been a common quality associated with the Malays when it comes to working or in getting things done. This could explain the reason why the Chinese students reported their communication experience as negative.

According to Zamani (2002), this notion of the lazy native is perpetuated from the silent protest towards the colonialist by not getting a piece of work done and by the fact that a Malay tends to give the reason that he or she is just '*malas*' (lazy) about doing something. A Malay tends to use this word as a universal excuse even though it may not be the actual reason. Other communities, on the other hand, would employ more reasoned explanations such as 'tiredness', 'unwell', 'not in the mood' or 'busy'. Understandably, the Malays' frequent use of the word gives the impression to the others that the Malays are indeed 'lazy' people.

Being 'religious' could be related to the observation that the Malays pray five times daily and go to the mosque every Friday. As a matter of fact, in Malaysia, events that are held or organised on a Friday will have 'Friday prayer' factored into the programme. This is to give opportunities to the Malays or Moslems in general, to perform Friday prayer. Such could be one of the best explanations for the Malays being perceived as 'religious' by the Chinese students.

In terms of improving communication with the Malay students, the suggestion that the Malay students should improve their command of the English language is consistent with

some studies by intercultural communication scholars whereby language is one dimension that could either ease or create barrier to communication among or between cultures and ethnicities.

Table 4 – Perceived Malay Stereotype; Theme 4 ~ Belief and Attitude (n=70)

	Item	Frequency
1	Lazy	36
2	Religious	32
3	Conservative	11
4	Friendly	10
5	Racist	9

A comparison between the stereotype items as perceived by Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese students shows a difference in terms of the reported items but they fall into the same category. The Malaysian Chinese students had ‘lazy’ and ‘religious’ while the Indonesian Chinese students reported ‘impolite’ and ‘arrogant’ the most. These four items, however, belong to the same category which is the ‘quality and attitude’.

The Indonesian Chinese students had also put negative attitudes as the top items e.g. ‘impolite and arrogant’. This could be due to the experience that they had in dealing with the Malay students in their universities. This also explains the reason why 45% of the Indonesian Chinese students find their communication experience negative.

Table 5 – Comparison of Stereotypes Contents between Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese Students

	Malaysian (n=70)		Indonesian (n=11)	
	Item	Frequency	Item	Frequency
1	Lazy	36	Impolite	12
2	Religious	32	Arrogant	11
3	<i>Mat rempit</i>	22	<i>Halal food</i>	8
4	Government/Politic	19	Kind	8
5	Privileges	16	Individualist	7
6	<i>Nasi lemak</i>	16	Quiet	6
7	<i>Halal food</i>	16	Short-tempered	6
8	<i>Tudung</i>	14	Open minded	3
9	Majority	12	Naughty	3
10	Big family	11	Selfish	3

In answering the question “How do you find your communication experience with the Malay students, 58% of the Malaysian Chinese students reported that they found it negative. Meanwhile, 63% of the Indonesian Chinese students reported their communication experience as neutral.

As a response to the question on how their communication with the Malay students could be improved, 65% of the Malaysian Chinese students suggested that the Malay students must improve their command of the English language followed by another 27% who believe that they themselves must improve their command of *Bahasa Malaysia*.

Meanwhile, 45% of the Indonesian Chinese students suggested that the Malay students should improve their command of the English language.

Table 6 – Communication Experience with Malay Students

Summary of answers given	Malaysia (n=70)	Indonesian (n=11)
Fine (OK)	17	3
Neutral (So-so)	12	7
Negative (Bad)	41	1

Table 7 – Suggestions on How Communication with the Malay Students Could Be Improved

Summary of answers given	Malaysian (n=70)	Indonesian (n=11)
The Malays must improve their English	46	5
I must improve my Bahasa Malaysia	19	4
Communicate more often	5	2

5.0 Limitation of Study

Some findings in this study require further evaluation i.e. the types of stereotype were not specified since the major interest was to examine the content of Malay stereotypes in general. For this reason, the participants listed down general stereotypes and this explains the existence of food-related stereotypes which could not be distinguished as either positive or negative. The imbalanced samples of Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese students also require attention. A balanced sample of both groups could further authenticate similarities and differences between these two groups.

6.0 Conclusion

Much has been made of racial stereotypes and how the holding of inaccurate and degrading views is detrimental to social harmony. More interesting is the question of to what extent the stereotypes held by the population conform to the views held by outside analysts of the Malay society.

Although the associated attributes or perceived stereotypes may affect the sensitivities of local Malay community, it is worth mentioning that, studies of a similar nature in which any race (e.g. Chinese and Indians too) are stereotyped and labeled with various attributes, could actually be traced back to as early as the colonial era. What makes these studies more interesting is the truth that the perceived stereotypes towards certain ethnic groups have always been maintained although with some minor evolutions (e.g. *mat rempit*) that have taken place. This has strengthened the theory on how stereotypes are actually maintained especially among members of certain groups towards their out-group members.

Theories and hypotheses on stereotype hold true in terms of its creation and maintenance processes. These are discernible whereby the Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese students share similarities with the Chinese communities in the past (e.g. Rabushka 1973) in terms of the attributes they associate the Malay with. This is a reflection of their social reality and such associations or stereotypes are what they categorise the social world to be.

In a nutshell, the most important thing is that studies of this kind should be taken as a legacy which enriches the knowledge of several field of studies (e.g. communication, sociology, etc) and what are found within them are accepted with an open mind to maintain social harmony which has actually characterised this country as unique in the eyes of many.

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